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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries, $6.60. Price payable in advance. May 25, 1943. Vol. CLXXXIII, No. 4. Whole Number 898.

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.*
S. A. FRAZER, *Secretary.*

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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

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Forty a Month Cowhand

THAT'S the way Walt Coburn described himself in the letter he wrote us in response to our inquiries about his Circle C letterhead, the background for his many popular Western stories and his own colorful experiences. He's one of the best known of Western writers, of course, and long popular in SHORT STORIES—both in our pages and in our office. The Coburns live about ten miles out of Tucson and Walt says he may be on horseback and hazing a pack mule again as in the old days, what with gas shortages and so forth. Here's his letter:

If I had to sum it up in just a few words I'd sum it up about like this: That I'm a forty a month cowhand who got too stove up to make a hand and cashed in on my campfire wind jamming by putting 'em on paper and getting paid for 'em.

Was born in Montana in 1889. Learned to ride on a little fat white cow pony called Snowflake who taught me more than I begun learning at school a few years after I'd learned to set him. Like most cow-country kids I grew up on a cattle ranch, learned brands and earmarks before I got into the first school grades. My dad was one of Montana's pioneers, drifting there in '63 when he was a kid. He placer-mined and fought Injuns and belonged to the Vigilantes that hung a few gents like Henry Plummer and George Ives. He registered the Circle C brand and built up one of the biggest outfits in Montana. The home ranch was at the foot of the Little Rockies, the stamping ground of outlaws like Kid Curry and his brothers and Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. I knew the Curry boys when I was a kid, punched cows later on with some of the cowpunchers who rode the old Outlaw Trail. There's a few things about the Wild Bunch and those other boys that I don't write about or talk about. Things that might make a few writers who have messed around with so-called fact stories about those cowpuncher-outlaws feel as silly as their facts sound to a man who knows the facts and has heard the owl hoot.

When we sold out in 1915, I drifted to Arizona where my two oldest brothers had been since about 1904. Punched cows there. A dally cowboy learning to tie his ketch rope hard and fast. And then the last war busted loose and I went into the Air Service. Came out with the stripes of a sergeant first class and a few or more hundred hours in the air to remember. Walked away from three forced landings and that luck of the Irish held out another month. I had gone back punching cows. Picked up a fall that busted a knee-cap. With the other leg already stove up from a spill in Montana, I was told by the vets that I'd better swap my saddle for something safe like a rocker. While tackling

a lot of odd jobs like garage work, surveying, firing a boiler, lifeguard on the beach, I was collecting a neat pile of rejection slips and returned manuscripts. Two years and nary a yarn sold. Then I got the hang of it. And that's all. The vets were right. It ain't exactly a rocking chair but I can set it without falling off while I pound the keys of a typewriter.

And when bad weather don't stiffen my knee hinges I throw my saddle on a little old ornery buckskin dun cow-pony called Tex and ride out across the foothills here where we live north of Tucson. Tex is spooky enough to keep the ride from getting monotonous. And while my cow-punching days are over, the feel of a saddle on the back of a cow-pony is almighty good.

I reckon that tells it. Except for this almighty important fact. That I wouldn't have a good home and what goes with it to show for the years behind, if it wasn't for Pat. Pat is the missus. And aces. The family is Tex, a black twelve-year-old cat called Sammy Skunk, and a big shaggy Airedale loaned me for the duration by a good friend who is somewhere around Cairo driving an ambulance.

My likes are few. Good music, good likker, good tobacco, good thick steaks. Jerky and frijoles and moonshine corn in a tight. Bull Durham wrapped in brown paper. And coyote yapping for music. In a tight. And I'd like a crack at the Japs and Nazis under the same rules we used in a rag-tag rebel outfit of Pancho Villa's that I was with about six months back in 1910. That would really wind things up. Roped, throwed and hogtied. And that's about all I can think of. So long.

WALT.

Old-Timers Know Their Stuff

SAM NICKELS, whose story in this issue is *Gun Spud*, holds a brief for the old times—witness the story itself. He gives us this opinion from his New Mexico hangout:

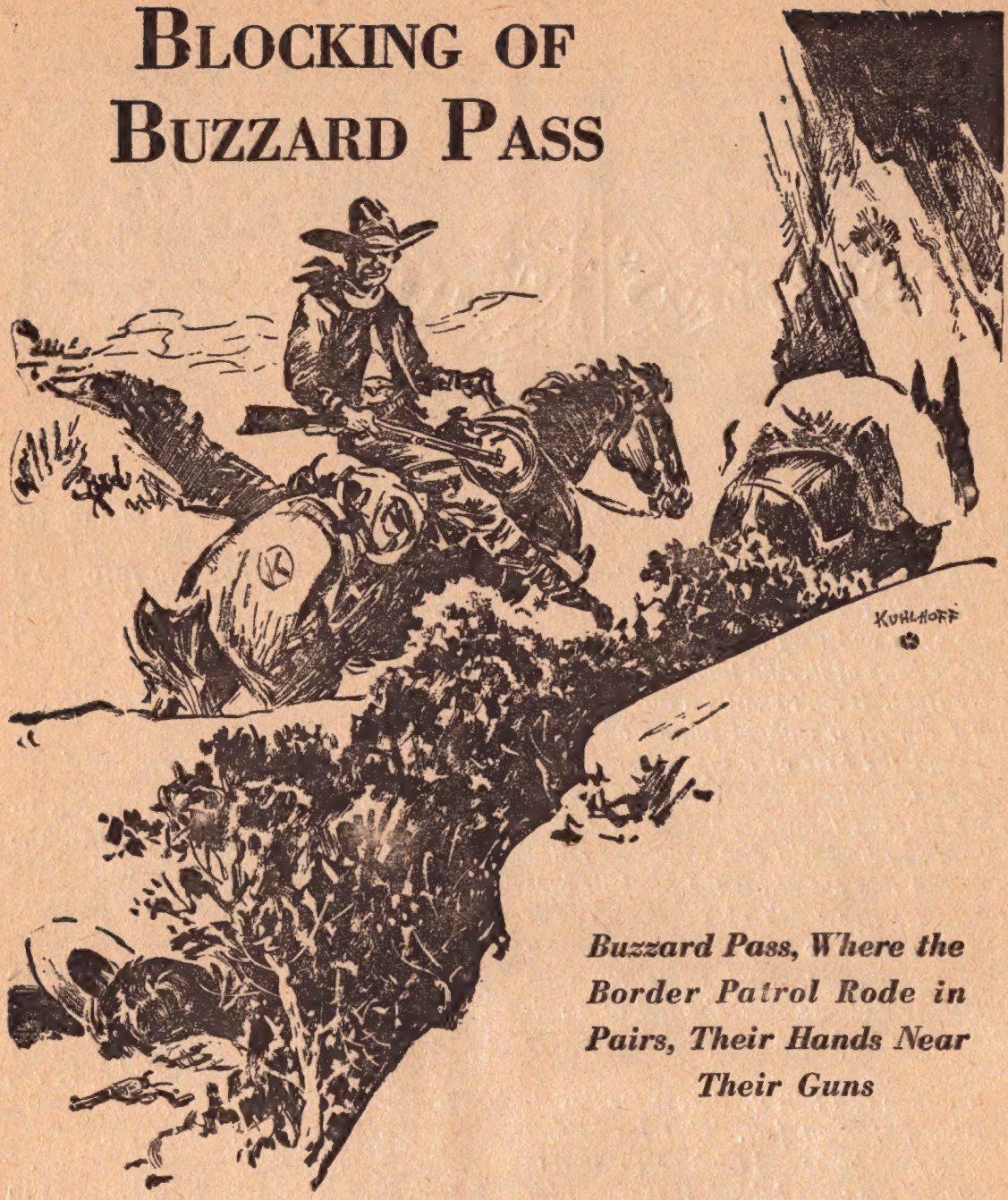
Maybe it would do a lot of us good to be forced to go back to the old horse-an'-buggy mode of travel. Cars and modern conveniences have spoiled us and made many of us soft. We need to get toughened up again. Present-day cowboys do too much of their riding in cars anyhow.

That Long Trail Home

H. S. M. KEMP frequently keeps us in touch with weather conditions in Saskatchewan. When he sent us "The Long Trail Home" he remarked that he had had no trouble with atmosphere—50-below atmosphere. *"Looking out the window,"* he wrote, *"while doing the story, I could see too much of it. Two weeks of the stuff—up to 59 below and always a dirty wind that at times became a young gale."*

Well, that must be over by now, even in Saskatchewan.

Blocking of Buzzard Pass



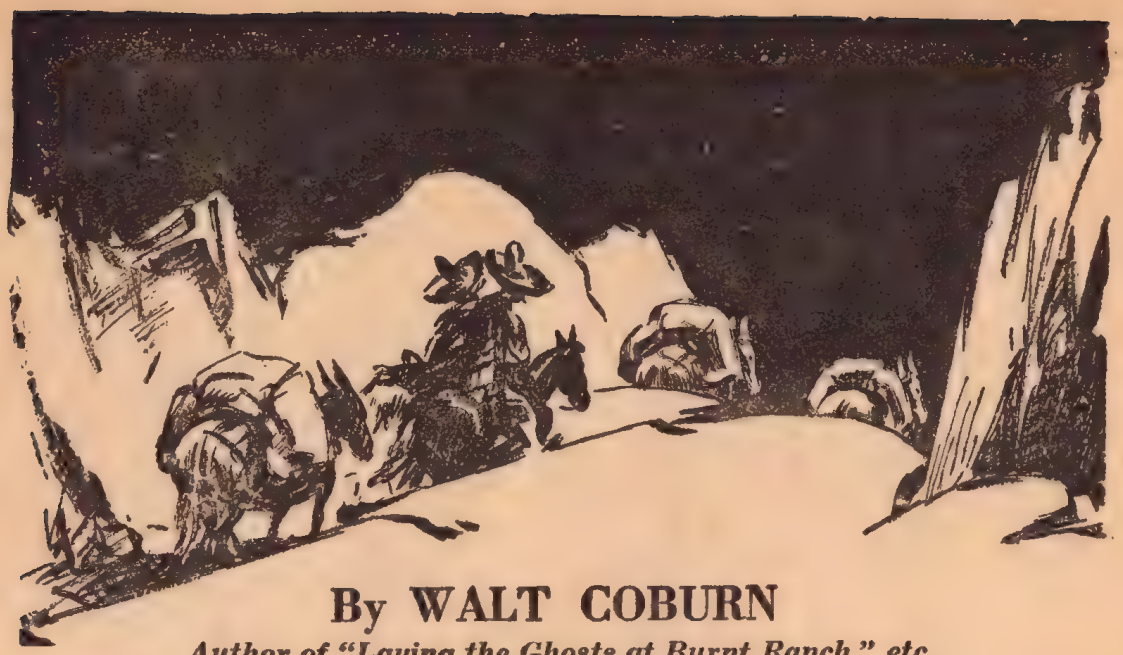
Buzzard Pass, Where the Border Patrol Rode in Pairs, Their Hands Near Their Guns

I

IT WAS the tail end of the long southwestern twilight when Inspector Mike Irish of the Border Patrol rode into Buzzard Pass from the Arizona side of the Mexican Border.

Big, husky, six foot Mike Irish was one of the old Mounted Guard that had been reorganized to form the Border Patrol and he held a roving commission and most always he rode alone. Mike had rust colored hair and a pair of puckered slate gray eyes. His wide, easy grin had come in handier than a gun many a time and he had learned by the hard way to keep a tail holt on his quick temper.

Men who had soldiered with Top Sergeant Mike Irish, Machine Gun Company, Ninety First Division, said of him that the word Fear had been left out of his book. That his headlong courage was



By WALT COBURN

Author of "Laying the Ghosts at Burnt Ranch," etc.

tempered by quick thinking and a cool headed way of getting a tough and dangerous job done.

Now, the youngest of the old Mounted Guard to be made Patrol Inspector, he had picked one of the toughest strips along that fifty-five hundred mile strip of Mexican Border to clean up. Rough mountains and barren desert. Where the Border Patrol rode in pairs with their hands near their guns. And when you ride into Buzzard Pass, hitch up your cartridge belt and slant your hat and slide your saddle gun free, the men who rode that strip of border told the new men who came to relieve them. Because Buzzard Pass was the toughest gap along that dangerous strip of Mexican Line.

THAT was what the chief had told Patrol Inspector Mike Irish.

"Then we'll plug it," grinned the freckled, rusty-haired Mike, "with the dead carcasses of rustlers and gun runners and smugglers. Tossin' the flea bit carcass of El Lobo on top of the heap."

"That Lobo Wolf is a tough Mexican, Mike."

"Mike Irish is a tougher Texican. You'll hear from me when I git the job done."

But when the Patrol Inspector rode alone into Buzzard Pass he was making the kind of a mistake that he'd cuss out any of his men for making. He was underestimating the cunning and fighting prowess of dangerous enemies.

Mike Irish was halfway through the ten mile twisting trail through the mountains, across the unmarked border that crossed the middle of Buzzard Pass, when it happened. It came so swiftly from the brush and boulder strewn mountain pass that the Patrol Inspector did not have a chance to even see or hear the gun flashes. The small volley of shots killed his horse and one of the bullets ripped through Mike's hat crown and creased his skull with a terrific impact that knocked him out cold and ripped a furrow along the scalp beneath the thick wiry growth of sweat matted rust colored hair.

Patrol Inspector Mike Irish lay like a dead man, his right leg pinned beneath the weight of his dead horse. His hat had fallen off and the blood oozed sluggishly to darken his hair. His eyes were closed and in the dim twilight the freckles on his tanned face looked black. The saddle carbine that he'd been carrying free of its saddle scabbard and across his saddle be-

tween the cantle and his lean belly, lay half buried in the coarse heavy sand.

THE gun echoes died away and a harsh gritty voice barked its orders.

"*Andale, hombres!* Git them mules a-movin'!"

A string of pack mules came up the pass from the Mexican end. Half a dozen stout shod Mexican mules loaded with mesquite wood. The Mexican who rode in the lead of the pack train was dressed in shabby, faded, peon woodchopper clothes and his battered straw sombrero had seen better days. But under his filthy shirt was buckled a filled cartridge belt and two holstered six-shooters. The Mexican who brought up the rear behind the last pack mule was similarly dressed and armed. And the two gringos who rode out of the brush and on ahead of the moving pack train were unshaven and tough looking and wore their cartridge belts and holstered six-shooters in plain sight. These two advance gringo guards packed saddle guns.

"Whoever that hombre is," said one of them, "we got 'im."

"I don't like it, Dorf," said the younger of the hard looking pair. "And I don't like leavin' him and his horse dead on the trail." He pulled a bottle of tequila from the deep pocket of his brush-scarred chaps and took a stiff drink.

"El Lobo will take the credit for it. Go easy on that damn booze, Max. You know the Old Man's orders."

"Sure I know the Old Man's orders. He told us to wait till moonrise before we started through Buzzard Pass. Then to shove this pack train through fast and not to shoot unless we got halted. But no! You got to get in a sweat. You got to get back before daybreak to San Pasqual to keep an eye on Dago Tony's daughter, that she don't run off maybe with that good lookin' Border Patrol feller. So what happens? So we bump into a stranger and we bushwhack him and we leave him and his horse dead in the Buzzard Pass for maybe that Border Patrol feller to stumble over on his way back to his camp. The Old Man will like that."

"We got no time to bury dead man and horse carcasses. That Border Patrol feller is by now drunk on Dago Tony's tequila and Tana sings him to sleep mebby at the cantina. I don't need no booze to warm my insides. But I take a drink with you, Max. Gimme the bottle."

Even a stranger could tell that Dorf and Max Wolfgang were brothers. They both had straw-colored hair and the same pale blue, ice cold eyes, the same heavy coarse faces that were partly disguised now by a week's growth of yellow whiskers and a powdering of sweaty desert dust.

Though they had been born and raised in Mexico and educated across the border in the U. S. they spoke both languages with a guttural accent. Because at home their father spoke always to them in German. His bookshelves were filled with books and periodicals from the Fatherland. Thirty odd years in Mexico had never weaned Otto Wolfgang from the land of his birth. The bulk of his mail bore German stamps. Large framed pictures of Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck hung on the walls of his big adobe house at San Pasqual. And now there was another portrait added. The portrait of a man who had changed his name from Schikelgruber to Adolf Hitler. The old German flag hung side by side on the wall with this new flag with a large Nazi reversed Swastika. Reams of literature and stacks of correspondence had kept Herr Otto Wolfgang of San Pasqual, Sonora, Mexico, in touch and abreast of the times and the new order of Nazi trend in Germany. In a recent mail had come from Berlin a copy of Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*. Herr Otto was reading it before he passed it along to his two stalwart sons for compulsory reading.

Dorf and Max took a lot of this compulsory reading with a tongue-in-cheek attitude. But big and tough as they were they dared not disobey the Old Man's or-

ders. Even their marriages to the daughters of influential Mexican politicians with Nazi leanings, were being carefully and methodically arranged. They'd never even seen the senoritas of Herr Otto's choosing. And meanwhile they were working for their Old Man who was the mayor of San Pasqual. There was big money to be made smuggling aliens into the United States and running dope across the border. Running guns and ammunition back on the return trip. Nobody knew how rich Herr Otto Wolfgang was. He banked in Mexico City, New York and Berlin. At San Pasqual the big red faced, paunchy Herr Otto Wolfgang was a big man in more ways than one.

Now Dorf and Max and their pack train with contraband cunningly hidden under the mesquite wood packed on grain fed mules, rode on through Buzzard Pass.

The stars came out and the ragged mountains looked as if they were cut out of black cardboard as they were silhouetted against the moonlit sky. But there in the Buzzard Pass it was dark. And the darkness was tainted with the odor of fresh blood when Mike Irish moved and groaned and blinked open his eyes.

MIKE'S head throbbed with pain. His skull felt as if somebody had split it open with a dull axe. The stench of spilled blood clogged his nostrils with nauseating effect. When he tried to move he found out that his right leg was pinned down. His groping hands found his saddle horn and felt along the neck of his dead horse. The drying blood on the dead horse was sticky and he wiped his hands on the coarse mane. His empty stomach tightened and he retched. The retching spasm agitated the throbbing pain in his head and he lay back, pillowing his head on his arms to keep his face out of the loose heavy sand. Heavy shudders of nausea swept over him and he was bathed in a clammy sweat. His right leg, partially numb, was shot with dull pain when he tried to free it. When he felt his injured skull his hands got sticky again with drying blood. After a while he commenced the hopeless task of digging the loose sand out from under his right leg. But he was held prisoner there in the pass by a thousand pounds of dead horse and it would take more than his pair of bare hands to dig him free. Though he labored until his fingernails were broken and his hands were rubbed raw and bleeding. He was thirsty. His lips were dry and cracking open and his tongue was like dusty flannel in his parched mouth.

Patrol Inspector Mike Irish wasted little time in guessing what had happened to him. Vain regrets would not help him out of this jackpot he'd got himself into. He had made a worse blunder than any greenhorn on the Border Patrol could make. He, Mike the Great Irish.

He had been left for dead. That much he could start with in his grim, pain-racked calculations. Left for dead, here in Buzzard Pass. They might come back, whoever the bushwhackers were. If they found him alive, they'd finish their job. Or another bunch of renegades would come along. And it would be the end of Mike Irish.

Not a chance in a million for anybody but an enemy to find him here. He had left one Border Patrol rider back at his camp on the Arizona side. Given him orders to stay out of Buzzard Pass, regardless. His name was Scott and he was, Mike had guessed, a little scared. Or perhaps just cautious. Give Scotty the benefit of the doubt. But spooky or cautious, Scotty would stay out of Buzzard Pass.

Scotty's pardner on the Patrol was made of different clay. His name was Rhodes and he was a Texan, reared in the shadow and traditions of the Alamo. Contrasting the short, blocky, steady going towheaded Scotty, Tex Rhodes was tall and rawboned, with hard black eyes and coarse straight black hair. A wild cowboy turned Border Patrol rider because it promised excitement, Tex Rhodes was reckless and head-

long, careless of danger, a nephew of a captain of the Texas Rangers. Rules and regulations and orders were things that never bothered Tex Rhodes. He would ride forty miles through any sort of weather to a Mexican dance. He drank anything from corn likker to mescal and held plenty of it like a man should handle his liquor. Prod him and you had a tough man to whip. And he was as handy with his big fists as he was with a six-shooter or saddle gun. But Tex was down at San Pasqual and if Scotty could be believed, the lanky Texan was on one of his periodic wild sprees that would last a week. According to Scotty, Tex Rhodes had gone plumb locoed over a girl at San Pasqual. Her name was Tana and her father was Dago Tony who owned the cantina. Dago Tony Marcetti was Italian and took orders from Otto Wolfgang. The girl's mother was Mexican and her cooking was something to remember. Tana played the guitar and sang songs and danced. And according to Scotty, this daughter of Dago Tony was plenty dynamite. Men fought with fists and knives and guns for her smiles. Dorf and Max Wolfgang had fought over her. Their father had pulled them apart and given them a lecture in a profane mixture of three languages. The almost legendary Mexican outlaw El Lobo, the Lobo Wolf, bragged that he'd cut the heart out of any man who made a pass at her, his Tana. He'd killed several men, Scotty said, who had taken that warning too lightly. And now it was Tex Rhodes who was making a damned fool out of himself over the senorita.

When Mike Irish had asked the towheaded Border Patrol rider who had run him, Scotty, off, Scotty's tanned face had turned brick red.

Mike Irish, though there was a sprinkling of gray in the thick wiry rust colored hair across his temples, was never blind to the beauty and charms of the fair sex. He had shaved before he left the Border Patrol camp and had helped himself to a change of Tex's second best shirt and Oregon pants.

"I'll hook them Dutch shorthorns an' that Lobo muley an' that longhorned Texican outa the herd," he told Scotty. "Them your alligator boots? Let's try 'em on for a fit."

One of those alligator boots was mashed down now, caught in a broken stirrup under a dead horse, Mike's foot inside it.

Scotty back at camp. Tex Rhodes dancing his Texican version of a fandango with the Senorita Tana. Patrol Inspector Mike the Great Irish with a bullet-ripped skull and trapped by his dead horse in Buzzard Pass.

MIKE'S empty belly tightened and knotted. Dust and blood clogged his nostrils.

The stabbing pains in his head blinded him so that the stars in the sky above him blurred like the milky way. He dug at the loose sand until his torn hands lost their strength and he lay back, dizzy and faint and sick, cold sweat beading his face and bathing him with its clammy dampness and wetting his hair. He panted like a spent runner and disconnected thoughts milled in his brain.

He was remembering with a sort of ironic clarity that this was supposed to be his yearly vacation. He'd planned on being in El Paso in a few days. On Washington's Birthday.

He tried to count back the years to that night when, in France, he had shared a waterlogged stinking shell hole in No Man's Land with three dead Huns and one Corporal Juan Ramirez. Cognac Juan, of his machine-gun company. That little *paisano* who had all the holidays on the calendar marked in his memory and did his best to celebrate those fiesta days with a bottle of cognac he'd share with Sergeant Mike Irish. And that night when he'd crawled across No Man's Land to drag back his badly wounded Sarge, he'd fetched along a bottle.

"Ees the birthday of Jorge Washeenton, Sarge. *Salud!*"

And before he'd fed Sergeant Mike Irish nine-tenths of that quart bottle of cognac and then packed Mike's big shrapnel-ripped body across No Man's Land to their own trenches, they'd made a solemn pact. That if they both came out of the war alive, they'd meet each year to celebrate Washington's Birthday.

"Where's your home, Sarge?" Corporal Juan Ramirez had asked.

"San Angelo, Texas."

"Me, I come from Guadalajara."

"Then we'll meet in El Paso," Mike had decided. "Start there at the Paso Del Norte Hotel. Cross the bridge acrost the Rio Grande and pin on a few tequilas at Juarez. How's that, Corp, ol' pardner?"

"*Bueno, Compadre* Sarge. El Paso. The Paso Del Norte Hotel. Every time on the birthday of Jorge Washeenton."

How many years back was that? Ten? Fifteen? Nearly twenty years. But they'd never met. They hadn't seen one another since that night when Juan had started back across No Man's Land, carrying and dragging his wounded sergeant. Then a Hun machine-gun had cut loose and filled Juan's legs with bullet holes and it was Sergeant Mike the Great Irish's turn to lug his wounded Corporal Cognac Juan. Both stretcher cases when they toppled into their own trench. Separated at the first aid station behind the lines, discharged later from different base hospitals, that was the last they'd seen of one another.

And somehow, in those later years, something had kept one or the other from getting to El Paso. The last three years Mike had managed to make it. Each time the manager and owner of the Paso Del Norte Hotel, Paul Harvey, had handed Mike Irish a sealed note. A brief note signed Corporal Cognac Juan Ramirez. Giving some vague but elaborate excuse for missing the rendezvous on Washington's Birthday.

This year it would be Sergeant Mike Irish who failed to show up. Washington's Birthday was a few days, about a week distant. Unless something like a miracle happened Mike Irish would, he told himself, be hunting for cool shade in hell by then.

Mike's brain was all muddled up. His mind kept slipping back to that pain-torn night in No Man's Land. The stench of dead Huns and the taste of blood mixed with cognac in his mouth. Corporal Cognac Juan's own Mexican version of Mademoiselle from Armentieres.

Then the sound of his own croaking voice would snap him back again to tonight's grim reality. He would lie hunched up on his side and commence clawing again at the heavy sand. Or he would lie back, sick and sweat sodden, gripping his six-shooter and listening. Listening for the return of the renegades who had not stopped to bury their dead, prepared to go out fighting. Hoping one of his bullets would find the heart of that phantom Mexican renegade they called El Lobo. The Lobo Wolf. Compared to this hard riding, quick triggered, mysterious and seldom seen renegade whose very name conjured up pictures of wild border outlawry, those other border jumpers were as so many mangy yellow coyotes. Patrol Inspector Mike Irish had told his chief that he'd get El Lobo before he returned to Headquarters. That the big red headed black carrion birds that gave Buzzard Pass its grisly name would pick the bones of El Lobo.

"Mike the Great Irish," he croaked in the darkness. Then he quit clawing and fell over on his back and lay there, his face masked by dirt and sweat and blood. As the round white moon pushed its way up over the jagged rim of Buzzard Pass.

Mike Irish did not hear the gritty metallic clink of shod hoofs on the rocky, sandy trail. The muffled swish and rattle of tarp-covered packs that rode stout Mexican mules. The creak of saddle leather and jingle of huge roweled Mexican spurs.

A dozen or more pack mules in a string,

hackamore ropes tied to the tail of the mule ahead. Coming southward through the rocky Buzzard Pass under the heavily armed escort of half a dozen Mexican guards.

THE Mexican riding in the lead of the pack train was of slim build and medium height but he sat his silver crusted Mexican saddle with swaggering ease. His soft leather charro jacket and tight fitting pants were scabbed by weather and brush scarred. The heavy silver threaded decorations on his huge felt sombrero were tarnished. He wore two filled cartridge belts around his lean middle and a pair of fancy engraved silver handled six-shooters were shoved into carved holsters. His lean, handsome face was marked by a white scar that crossed one cheek from ear to a corner of his mouth. A half smoked black cigarette hung from that corner of his mouth. His black eyes glittered in the shadow of his sombrero. He was singing softly to himself but the sound of the song threaded through the other sounds of the pack train.

"That Senorita from Armentiers
Parley voo!"

His sweat marked horse snorted and its running walk stopped stiff-legged.

One of the silver handled six-shooters glinted in the moonlight as it slid from its carved holster.

"Who's there?" the singer barked.

"Ma'mselle . . . Armentiers . . . Pull it out with your teeth, Corp. . . . Not even Cognac Juan can drink with cork inna bottle."

"*Madre de Dios!* Sarge!"

Juan Ramirez was off his horse and bending over the delirious Mike Irish. Even in the dark shadow of his big sombrero, his dark skinned face looked pale.

Then he barked staccato orders to his men and they jerked loose the latigo strap and uncinched the saddle, then dragged and lifted the dead horse from Mike's leg.

There were a couple of extra horses in the pack train. Juan Ramirez told one of his men to put a saddle on one of those horses and ride bareback.

He poured water from a canteen over Mike's face and head and got some water and tequila down the delirious man's throat.

Then he sent the pack train on. He tied Mike in a saddle and held him there, riding alongside him. Following the pack train through Buzzard Pass. When they were clear of the pass and into the foothills with the desert stretching wide below, Juan Ramirez told his men to follow along with their pack mules that were bringing guns and cartridges into Mexico. It was not yet daybreak when he fetched the unconscious Mike Irish into the little village of San Pasqual. Halting at the edge of the village at an adobe house where a light showed behind drawn curtains. The little adobe house stood in the shadow of a small mission church with whitewashed walls. Beyond was the little cemetery with its mound-grown earth and flowers in broken bottles and crosses.

"Padre Estaban!" called Juan Ramirez.

The door opened and framed in the doorway was a leathery faced priest with white hair and warm brown eyes. His brown monk's robe was faded and patched. Bare brown feet were shoved in rawhide sandals.

"Juan, my son!" he spoke in Spanish. "Who have we with us?"

"Sergeant Mike Irish, Padre, of whom I have told you many times."

"Patrol Inspector Mike Irish," the priest spoke in English.

"*Si,* Padre. Therefore we shall keep secret the things he should not know, eh? Better, Padre, that you hide him here. Otherwise they will find a way to kill him. I will pay—"

"You have already paid, son. Many times. My house is his."

The priest's lean, strong fingers were un-

knotting the rawhide reata that tied Mike Irish in the saddle. He lowered his voice to talk across the horse's rump to Juan Ramirez.

"Nobody saw you enter town, my son?"

"Unless the 'dobe walls have eyes."

"*Si,* my son, and ears in the bargain. That jefe of yours," the priest spat in the dust as if he were ridding his mouth of a slimy taste, then crossed himself hastily. "That hombre! That Herr Otto Wolfgang! That mayor, who carries always that heavy rawhide quirt to get servile obedience from the Mexicans. That hombre who would have us call him Don Otto. His adobe walls have a hundred eyes that see things, even on the blackest night. Long ears that hear the faintest whisper many miles away. *Madre de Dios,* my son, I dread to think what would happen to you should that black hearted hombre learn that you have given aid to Patrol Inspector Mike Irish."

"I am El Lobo!" Juan Ramirez drew himself up stiffly to his lean six feet six inches and patted his silver handled six-shooters. Then one of his shining black eyes winked slyly.

"But it is you, Father," he said gravely, "who will be in danger."

Padre Estaban held out his lean hands. The palms and the back of his two hands were marked by ugly, dented scars. There were similar scars on his insteps and the soles of his feet. The faint smile on his leathery face was stiff lipped and his dark eyes glowed like burning coals.

"What more is there for that human beast to do to me, my son? Yonder stands that big cross where that renegade Otto Wolfgang and his pair of jackal sons crucified me. And only for you, my son, and your brave followers, I should have died as the Senor Dios died, crucified on His cross. That base one!" The priest spat again and crossed himself.

They carried the limp Mike Irish into the priest's house. Juan Ramirez scowled thoughtfully and scratched his head.

"It ees not one of the feast days of the church, Father," he spoke in English, "but for me and my *compadre* Mike ees the beegest day of all. You 'ave per'ps heard of Senor Jorge Washeenton? Ees Americano saint."

"There are no American saints," smiled the padre. "But George Washington is called the Savior of America. And you've told me about that night in the shell hole."

"Ees come soon now, that birthdays of that Savior Jorge. Ees too bad we can't make him a saint's day, no?"

Father Estaban smiled faintly. "The twenty-second of February falls on a Sunday, Juan. *Como no?* Why not?"

"Weeth the bell ringing? Weeth the brass cannon salute?"

"*Como no,* Juan? Why not?"

"*Bueno! Bueno! Bueno!*" Then his grin faded and he looked down at the still, unconscious form of Mike Irish, now stripped of his clothes and lying covered by a blanket on the priest's bed.

"Mike Irish will live, Juan. There's a scalp to sew together. A slight concussion. Exhaustion and thirst contributing factors. A sponge bath and alcohol rub and sleep will put him back on his feet."

"Good, my Father. Now there is work for El Lobo. More money to collect from that *cabron* Herr Otto Wolfgang, no?"

"Go with God, my son. *Adios.* And God protect you!"

II

PATROL INSPECTOR MIKE IRISH opened his eyes. The whitewashed adobe walls of the room were bare save for a crucifix on the wall and a small painted wooden statue of the Lady of Guadalupe with a candle vigil light burning in a red glass container. Clean blue curtains drawn across the window. There was a small Mexican boy dozing on a bench in front of the closed and barred wooden door that was painted the same shade of blue as the curtains. A pale blue. Called Virgin blue by the Mexicans.

Something of Mike Irish's boyhood training prompted him to cross himself. The last he remembered was that blackness in Buzzard Canyon. Pain and thirst and delirium and danger. How he had told himself that nothing less than a miracle could save him. He lay there for quite a while. His head no longer throbbed with pain. His hands were skinned up and when he cautiously slid aside the blanket he saw that his right leg, bare beneath a clean knee length white cotton nightshirt, was bruised and discolored and a little stiff and aching when he swung his legs over the edge of the big homemade bed. Instead of the odor of blood in his nostrils there was that faint odor of burnt incense he recalled from his younger altar boy days.

"By Saint Patrick," he grinned, "mebbyso it was a miracle?"

The small Mexican boy came awake with a jump, his dark eyes as round as saucers.

"Where am I, youngster?" grinned Mike Irish. "How did I get here?"

"El Lobo breeng you, Senor. *Por Dios,* I forget! I am a secret!"

"You're a secret all right. El Lobo, eh? I'll tell a man you're a secret. Where am I? Whose house is this?"

"Ees the *casa* belong to Father Estaban."

"And you, boy? Who are you?"

"I'm Paco. My papa ees Dago Tony. Ees own the cantina, my papa. I am the guard here. Nobody come een. You stay een here, please, Senor? Ees bad outside *por* you. I'm a secret. You are another secret."

"Bad for me outside, eh?" grinned Mike, testing his weight on his two legs. "If this is San Pasqual, I kin believe that much. I'll be a secret, Paco. But even a gringo secret feels better when he's wearin' his own clothes instead of the borrowed nightshirt belongin' to the fightin' priest of San Pasqual. There's a peso in the pocket of my pants, Paco. It's yours."

Somebody had sewn the built rip in Mike's scalp and fed him medicine to check the fever and rubbed healing salve on his bruised leg. He'd been bathed and rubbed down with a mixture of alcohol and oil. Young Paco crossed the room to a clothes closet. Somebody had cleaned the dirt and blood from his clothes and shined his borrowed alligator boots. He gave the small Paco a couple of pesos. Then dressed. His cartridge belt and six-shooter hung from a long wooden peg on the whitewashed adobe wall. He buckled on his gun and felt better for the heavy weight of it around his lean flanks.

There was a basin and pitcher of Mexican pottery. Shaving soap and brush and razor and strop and a mirror above the washstand. Father Estaban, known along both sides of the border as the fighting priest of San Pasqual, forgot nothing.

MIKE IRISH lathered the wiry red stubble on his face and shaved. He kept up a lively, if somewhat one-sided conversation with the small Paco who grinned and giggled and laughed, his dark eyes shining like round lights set in his carefully scrubbed face. Paco was dressed in his best black suit, his black hair wet down and brushed. He gripped the two big silver pesos in a scrubbed fist and dangled his legs in an animated fashion as he sat on the bench that was placed across the barred blue door.

"Now, Paco, once more. Who fetched me here?"

"El Lobo, Senor! But I am a secret. Them other kids here at San Pasqual, they talk like magpies. Paco ees a secret."

Mike grinned widely and shook his head and washed the dried bits of lather from his shaved jaw. He was drying his face when he heard it.

It came from the old mission church. A woman's voice. Clear toned as an old Spanish bell. She was singing the Ave Maria. Singing it as some angel from heaven might sing it.

Mike Irish stood motionless, the towel gripped in his hand. Holding his breath

a little. Until the last notes of the song faded.

"A miracle at San Pasqual," he voiced his thoughts in a sort of awed tone, "an angel singin'."

"Ees no angel," grinned the unimpressed young Paco. "Ees my sister Tana."

Then the big old Spanish bell that hung by heavy rawhide from the big mahogany tree section embedded in the thick adobe walls of the San Pasqual mission was ringing. Calling the faithful to mass.

Then a cannon boomed. Mike Irish stiffened and grabbed at his gun. Paco had jumped, startled from his bench. Then his scrubbed face beamed and his dark round eyes shone. His white teeth flashed in a grin.

"Ees the beeg fiesta!" he cried excitedly. "El Lobo makes it a fiesta day! The great Americano saint! Saint Jorge Washeenton!"

Mike Irish was staring at the small boy. His heart was pounding against his ribs like a hammer. There was the sound of wild cheering out in front of the old mission. The old brass cannon boomed again. Paco had quit his bench and was jumping up and down excitedly.

"Who did you say made George Washington's fiesta day, Paco?"

"El Lobo!"

"What," asked Mike Irish, his voice none too steady, "is the real name of your El Lobo?"

"Ees no other name *por* heem. Just El Lobo. Ees enough, no, Senor?"

"Ees enough," nodded Mike Irish. "You're some punkins of a secret, young Paco."

Paco was squirming to get out there and join the fiesta. But when Mike said something about them going out, the grin faded from the small boy's face and the laughter went out of his eyes. He shook his head stubbornly and stood there in front of the door, prepared to defend its barred exit. Mike grinned widely and told Paco to take it easy. That he wouldn't lay a hand on such a game hearted young secret guard for all the pesos in Mexico.

The big old Spanish bell was still ringing. The old brass cannon boomed again. Then there was a rapping at the barred door. Mike's gun slid from its holster.

"Open, Paco!" called a cautious voice outside. "It's Padre Estaban!"

Mike slid his gun back into its holster. Paco slid the bench aside and shoved back the heavy hardwood bar.

Father Estaban, the fighting priest of San Pasqual, came in quickly and barred the door before he took notice of Mike Irish. The priest's dark eyes were bright and his slow smile softened the lines that deeply etched his leathery face. He made the sign of a cross before he offered his lean, strong, calloused hand to the Patrol Inspector.

"So you are that Mike the Great Irish!" His voice was deep toned like the old Spanish bell.

"And you," grinned Mike, "are the Fightin' Priest of San Pasqual."

There were questions that Mike wanted to ask. Corporal Cognac Juan Ramirez of the —th Machine Gun Company, Ninety-first Division of the old A. E. F. was the man who had given him that title of Mike the Great Irish. Out yonder that old mission bell and an old brass cannon were declaring a fiesta day for Jorge Washeenton—

"It's high noon," said the padre. "My breakfast hour. And you can do with some nourishment, son. After we've eaten I'll answer the questions in your eyes."

He let Paco out the door with a final whispered warning to keep his secret well hidden. Then the padre and the Patrol Inspector were alone. A bottle of old brandy and two polished glasses were set on the table. The padre filled the glasses and handed Mike Irish his drink.

"To El Lobo!" smiled the silvery haired priest.

"To Corporal Juan Ramirez," said Mike Irish.

The priest nodded. They touched glasses and drank.

Mike's brain was filled with confusing thoughts as he watched the priest in the little kitchen beyond, preparing breakfast.

Things that had puzzled Mike began to straighten out into clean cut bits that fitted together to work out the puzzle to a solution. If Juan Ramirez was El Lobo that would account for the fact that Corporal Cognac Juan had not kept a rendezvous with Sergeant Mike Irish in El Paso. El Lobo was a border outlaw with a price on his head. Mike Irish was an Inspector of the Border Patrol.

But it was almighty hard to link the Juan Ramirez Mike had known in the army with that hard riding, quick shooting border renegade who called himself El Lobo. If half the stories about El Lobo could be believed——

"There is sometimes much smoke," sounded the priest's deep-toned yet soft voice from the kitchen, "and that smoke is black and its stench is ill-smelling. And its malodorous stench is caused by throwing carrion rubbish on that clear, bright, clean flame. Like a bad smelling smudge. Such a clean bright flame might be our friend El Lobo. The foul smelling smudge something thrown there by his enemies. By such evil men as Herr Otto Wolfgang and his two wicked sons.

"Pull aside the curtain in there, Senor. But use a measure of caution. You will see, there beyond the cemetery, a large cross. The wood of the cross is charred at its base. Otto Wolfgang, a man who has renounced his God and Creator, crucified a priest on that cross. He would have burned that crucified priest alive. The man we call El Lobo arrived in time to save that priest's life. Though that man was called a Lobo Wolf and Herr Otto Wolfgang is the man who gives him his orders and pays him for smuggled guns.

"Buried beneath the walls of the mission is part of the money paid El Lobo. Much of the rest is given to the poor. Because our El Lobo has gaiety as well as courage in his heart, he spent the remainder freely at the cantina. Mexicans are like children. Sometimes they are bad children, to be sure. But they have a child's love for bright colors and music. Though the women who have lost one dear to them wear nothing but black for months and years, some of them for the rest of their lives. And some of their music has in it the tragedy and sadness and the poverty of Old Mexico and her children. But you are of Irish blood and can understand because the Irish know the depths and the heights of emotions.

"So think well, my son, before you pass judgment on El Lobo."

"Amen to that, Father. Juan Ramirez saved my life twenty years ago. El Lobo brought me here from a death trap in Buzzard Pass. Even a Patrol Inspector can't forget things like that."

"And you will remember about the flame being clean burning. Mike the Great Irish is his grand hero. The stories he's told me!"

The priest smiled and shook his thick silvery hair. "Stories that were hardly fit for the ears of a priest."

Mike Irish grinned widely. "He'll show up here? He's out there now?"

THE priest shook his head. "Gone with his men. There was trouble last night. Just before dawn, to be more exact. One of your Border Patrol men, the one called Tex Rhodes. He used only his fists but he nearly killed Dorf and Max Wolfgang, before he was overpowered by Wolfgang's men and thrown in jail. Otto Wolfgang, the mayor of San Pasqual, gave official orders to have your Tex Rhodes stood against the adobe wall and shot. Your fighting Texan escaped, nobody seems to know just how. El Lobo dropped from sight about the same time. Neither of them have been seen since. The Senorita Tana would be the only one who might know. But that young lady has a way of

saying much and telling less than nothing."

"Like young Paco," grinned Mike Irish. "She's a secret."

The padre smiled and nodded. Then he put breakfast on the scrubbed table in the spotless kitchen. A huge platter of eggs scrambled with chili seasoned Mexican ham, a dish called teresa. Tortillas and strong black coffee.

They were drinking coffee and smoking when the clear sharp sound of a bugle sounded in the near distance. The padre quit talking, his leathery face settling into stern, grim lines.

Mike Irish was listening intently to that bugle call. He knew every Mexican bugle call. Every bugle call in the U. S. Army. That sharp, brisk bugle call belonged to neither of those categories.

When its final note had died into silence Mike stared across the table into the priest's eyes.

"German," said the priest quietly. "The German call for assembly. Come. We'll risk being seen. I want you to see it with your own eyes."

They went out after the father had done a little scouting. Across the garden with its flowers and fruit trees and into the rear door of the mission. Through the small sacristy with its altar garments and robes and stacks of blessed candles, through the empty church and up a steep narrow ladder-like stairway to the belfry.

Out in front of the church the Mexicans were starting for the grove of trees along the banks of the little San Pasqual River. They were dressed in their Sunday finery, gay colored and festive. Toward the barbecue pits under the trees.

Beyond lay the little adobe village, its buildings scattered out in the clumps of mesquite trees. Goats and burros and chickens. Little brown adobe houses.

"The larger buildings on the street," said the padre, "are Otto Wolfgang's store and two storehouses with doors a foot thick and guarded day and night. Across is Tony Marcetti's restaurant and cantina with its walled patio and tables.

"The bigger building beyond, at the end of the street, with the pink painted walls, is the jail. Across from it the barracks. The big cleared land beyond is the parade ground. Watch!"

The padre's lean brown arm stretched from the loose, faded brown sleeve, and Mike Irish saw the deep scar on the back of the lean, strong hand where a spike had once been driven through to nail that man to a cross. Then Mike's eyes followed the direction of the pointing arm.

He saw the small khaki clad bugler. Other soldiers in khaki uniforms and straw sombreros. Two mounted officers on horseback who did not look like Mexicans.

"Dorf and Max Wolfgang," explained the priest. "Officers." Padre Estaban spat and crossed himself.

The bugle sounded sharply. The soldiers with bayonets fixed to their rifles lined up. Lined up in two company fronts facing one another.

The two officers barked commands. The soldiers formed a column of fours. Marched in two columns across the parade ground where a big man in a gray uniform that brought back Mike's memory of German officers in prison camp, sat a big fat iron gray horse.

As those two small companies of khaki-clad Mexicans passed in review, Mike grunted with surprise. Then choked off a cuss word and grinned flatly.

"They're goose-steppin'! Like Jerry Huns on parade!"

There was something comical about that straw-sombreroed Mexican outfit in two lines as crooked as snakes, trying their sweating best to keep a goose-stepping line. But there was, on the other hand, something else that was not at all comical.

The padre's leathery face had a grayish tinge when Mike Irish turned to look at him.

"Herr Otto Wolfgang's private army," said the priest. There was something al-

most like a deep growl in his voice. The deep, dark eyes glittered with an unpriestly light.

"Armed with the best guns that could be bought and smuggled here," said the padre. "Trained by Dorf and Max Wolfgang, under the stern eye of Herr Otto. Storehouses filled with rifles and machine-guns. Ammunition for the guns. Bought with Herr Otto Wolfgang's money. The money he's made smuggling aliens and contraband opium and other drugs across your border. Guns run across the line by El Lobo. Stored here. Waiting for another Der Tag. Have you seen enough, Patrol Inspector Mike Irish?" The voice of Father Estaban had lost its deep-toned softness. It was harsh and bitter.

The padre's deepset eyes were burning coals now. His voice dropped to a low whisper.

"Perhaps on the anniversary of your George Washington's birth, something will happen here at the little Mexican village of San Pasqual. *Quien sabe?* Who knows? El Lobo has been impatient for a long time. Meeting you once more after nearly twenty years has kindled the smoldering fire of that impatience. El Lobo has declared this holiday. May the Senor Dios forgive me if I have sinned by sanctifying his actions. El Lobo's fighting men are well armed, well mounted, brave to the point of foolhardiness when he leads them. And some of that goose-stepping outfit yonder will desert that flag you see hanging limply from the top of the tall flagstaff at the far end of the parade ground."

The flag hung, as the padre said, limply in the sunlight that was unstirred by even a slight breeze.

"You mean, padre, that flag—"

"Is the Nazi flag of a new Germany that's come under the maniacal rule of a man called Hitler."

Mike Irish shook his rust-colored head. This thing had stunned him and it was a long minute before he could tear his gaze from that limp flag and the goose-stepping Mexicans in their straw sombreros and bayonet fixed rifles.

"You mean, Father," he finally broke the silence, "that El Lobo is fixin' to lock horns with that outfit?"

"Como no?" smiled the fighting padre of San Pasqual. "Why not?"

"By God, Father," grinned Mike Irish. "And I'm not takin' the name of God in cussin', you kin deal me in!"

"I'm of the opinion," smiled the padre, "that our friend El Lobo has already dealt you in. And now let us get back to my house."

AS THEY slipped in the front door Mike Irish heard somebody singing in the kitchen behind the closed door leading into it. There was the clatter of dishes in a dishpan. A girl's voice singing.

"The Senorita from Armentieres,
Parlez vous!"

The voice of the Senorita Tana. Mike Irish grinned uncertainly. Some of those Mexican verses Corporal Cognac Juan had composed were as ribald as the A. E. F. rendition of Mademoiselle from Armentieres.

Padre Estaban must have been sharing Mike's fears because he barred the front door hastily and called out in his deep-toned voice:

"Something like the Sanctus, perhaps, or the Ave Maria, would be more appropriate under the roof of a padre's dwelling on a holy day!"

From the kitchen came a shrill squeal and the sound of a dish breaking on the worn tiled floor. Then the kitchen door was flung open and Mike Irish got his first glimpse of the famous or perhaps notorious Senorita Tana.

She had a snowy white apron on that covered the front of her gay colored fiesta dress. Below it were slim, shapely bare legs and red-slippered feet. Above the huge apron showed the girl's face. Her

olive cheeks were flushed. Large brown eyes shone with an exciting mixture of confusion and pure devilment. Her hair was thick and black, shining with coppery tints. Bright red lips parted to show startling white teeth. Her small nose wrinkled when she smiled.

"See what you have done?" Tana had a knack of taking the swift offensive. "You broke the very best one plate in the house."

Her gaze went past the priest to look with the frank and open curiosity of a small girl at the Patrol Inspector.

"So," she nodded, "you are that Mike the Great Irish!"

"And you," grinned the rusty haired Mike, "are the Senorita Tana men fight about."

He was wishing that Tana was not El Lobo's sweetheart. Or was she?

There was a frantic pounding on the door. Paco's tense, sobbing voice. "Open. Padre Estaban! Ees trouble!"

III

PACO was panting hard. His eyes were round with fear and excitement. His Sunday suit was torn and grimed, his slicked-down black hair mussed, and trickles of sweat made little rivers through the dust that powdered his round face.

"Ees een the jail!" Paco panted when the door was closed and barred. "Mama feex the lonch to take to my papa een the jail."

"Papa in jail?" gasped Tana.

"Papa gets out soon, I theenk. But I hear that Dorf tell that Max now ees the time to make a quick end to El Lobo while he ees lock' op."

"El Lobo in the lock-up?" Tana's face was ivory white.

"Weeth chains on the hands and the foots," said Paco. "Alberto Salvador ees on guard. Always that Alberto ees 'ongry. I geeve to heem the lonch for papa and my two pesos and he lets me talk weeth El Lobo. El Lobo has a piece of paper. He write a note weeth a cartridge bullet. He say to me, "Paco, geeve thees note to nobody but Mikes the Greats Irish. Ees you, Senor."

"Then give me the note, Paco." Mike found two pesos in his pocket and handed them to the moon-faced boy.

Tears welled to Paco's eyes. He looked more angry now than scared.

"That Alberto Salvado, that hongry billy-goat, ees take away that note from me. Then he slaps me and keeck me out. Now I guess he geeve that note to Herr Otto Wolfgang. Now for sure they weel shoot El Lobo against the 'dobe wall."

Paco's under lip quivered and his bravery cracked and he was just a small boy sobbing in the arms of his older sister.

"I am a secret," sounded Paco's muffled sobbing. "I don't tell to nobody notheeng. I am a secret!"

The padre's face was stern lined and there was accusation in his dark eyes.

"Now," he said in his careful English, his way of letting Mike know that he was including him in his talk, "now, Tana, perhaps you will tell us why you left the fiesta crowd to wash the dishes in the kitchen of the old padre. It was more than just a desire to make eyes at the Senor Mike Irish. All morning you avoided me. A guilty little conscience, no?"

"Can I help it if that big Tejano Tex Rhodes likes me? Is it my fault he knocks the heads of Dorf and Max together and the soldiers attack that Tejano and put him in jail? I am no old woman with eyes that cross together across a big ugly nose and a hairlip and a clubfoot. I am Tana. The Tejano is a man. Those Dorf and Max are German pigs! So!" She stamped her high-heeled red slippers.

"So you have got Tex Rhodes thrown in jail," the padre went on sternly. "Herr Otto Wolfgang puts your papa in jail for not calling the soldiers sooner to help Dorf and Max. And he sentences Tex Rhodes to be shot against the adobe wall. So!"

"Then El Lobo rides up with his men," said Tana. "I tell him everything that happens at the cantina. So El Lobo has a talk with Herr Otto.

"El Lobo tells Herr Otto Wolfgang that to 'dobe wall a Border Patrol gringo is bad business that brings trouble to everybody.

" 'Turn that gringo Tex Rhodes over to me and my men,' El Lobo tells Herr Otto. 'He will then be my prisoner. I give that Border Patrol gringo a military escort through Buzzard Pass and across the border. But on the way that gringo Tejano, who is borracho drunk, he makes a bad fight and tries to escape. My men get too much excited. They shoot that unwanted one. Is better that way, no?'

" '*Ley del Fuego,*' chuckles Herr Otto Wolfgang. 'The Law of Gunfire. The Law of Escape. *Bueno!* You are a smart fellow, El Lobo. Smarter than those two stupids, Dorf and Max. Take charge of the Texan nuisance. Leave his carcass in Buzzard Pass for the big birds. I depend upon you to do your job well. Make a mistake and it shall be you, El Lobo, who takes the Tejano's place against the adobe wall.'

" 'I make no mistake,' El Lobo tells that Herr Otto Wolfgang. 'Is not Tana my senorita? Has not that gringo interloper tried to make love to my Tana? What has happened to other imbeciles who have tried to make love to my Tana? They are dead, no? Turn over to me that gringo Tex Rhodes. The buzzards shall fill their bellies.' "

"So?" questioned the padre. "And then?"

Tana shrugged her shoulders. "*Quien sabe?* Who knows? Paca says El Lobo is in jail. Our Mayor Herr Otto Wolfgang is going to stand El Lobo against the adobe wall and his goose-steppers will shoot him. Do not look at me like that, *Padre mio.* Make the fire in your eyes burn the soul of this red-headed gringo here in your house, who is the cause of the trouble. El Lobo brought him here before daybreak after Dorf and Max shoot him and his horse in Buzzard Pass. Dorf and Max know about that. That is why they make a fight with that Tex Rhodes. To kill him also. My papa sees El Lobo bring a wounded man to this house. So? So they put my papa in jail until he talks about it to Herr Otto.

"El Lobo and his men killed Tex Rhodes in Buzzard Pass. Make no mistake about that. El Lobo kills any hombre who tries to steal away his Tana. *Bueno!* El Lobo is a caballero who fights for his senorita. All of San Pasqual knows that. It is not because El Lobo failed to kill that big American drunkard. No!"

Tana stamped her red slippers against the worn red tiles. Her slim finger pointed at Mike Irish.

"Because he brings his old army buddy he always talks about, his Mike the Great Irish here. That is why they will stand El Lobo against the adobe wall and shoot him full of bullets until he drops dead in the dust. You gringo *cabron!*" Her voice shrilled.

MIKE IRISH stood on widespread legs, his black brows pulled together in a scowl. Tana's hot-tempered accusation left him cold.

The priest put a hand on the girl's quiv-

ering shoulder. He did not scold her for using that name *"cabron"* which could mean "billy goat" or might be interpreted more profanely.

"Quiet, little daughter," he told her gently. "Quiet. There are things you do not understand. Turn your screaming into smiles and go back to your mother at the cantina. Smile, then, upon Dorf and Max Wolfgang. Find out where El Lobo's men are. Send Paco to them with this message. That they will come, one at a time and cautiously, to the church, as soon as darkness falls. I will go, myself, to talk with El Lobo. Even Herr Otto Wolfgang dares not deny a man condemned to die his privilege of receiving the last sacraments of his church."

Tana's anger melted in tears. Father Estaban stroked her sleek black hair until her sobbing ceased.

"The last sacrament," she whispered. "No! If El Lobo dies, then they must also kill me. Let me stand beside him then. Let their bullets kill me, also."

"Hush, child." The priest halted another burst of hysteria. "It is now the beginning of the afternoon. Many hours until sunrise tomorrow when such executions are carried out at the jail. You know those goose stepping troops well. Better than Herr Otto or his sons Dorf and Max know their own men. I, also, know which of them we can trust. See to it then, that these two soldiers go on guard at dark, when they change the guard. See to it that the two men who go on guard at the jail are Guillermo Garcia and Eduardo Brachamonte. You can attend to that, Tana?"

Tana nodded. "Willie Garcia. Eddie Brachamonte. I will see to it that Sergeant Pablo Ignacio puts those two on guard. Pablo is jealous of those two and they do not like the guard duty on a fiesta night and Sergeant Pablo Ignacio will be glad to revenge himself like that. But why do you want those two on guard tonight?"

"What you do not know," smiled the priest, "you cannot talk about with a careless tongue. Do as I say if you want El Lobo to escape tonight. Now go to the cantina. Your mama needs you. Take Paco along. You'll repeat nothing we have talked about here, my brave Paco."

"I am a secret," said Paco. "I know where El Lobo's men are hiding. I tell them what you say. To come to the church after the dark. I am a secret."

WHEN Tana and Paco were gone the padre's smile faded. There was sorrow and a grim desperation mirrored in his deepset dark eyes.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "your man Tex Rhodes is dead. Killed according to the Law of Flight. *Quien sabe?* You still wish to help our El Lobo? Your Corporal Juan Ramirez?"

Mike Irish grinned. "Why not? He saved my life. I'll settle with El Lobo about Tex Rhodes when the time comes. You think there's a chance to get him out of the carcel?"

"A desperate chance, yes. If it fails, you'll be in command of his men. I'll tell them to take your fighting orders, to follow you wherever you lead them. El Lobo has set this day, your George Washington's birthday, as the great day of our liberation here at San Pasqual. Here in this little village of San Pasqual where Herr Otto Wolfgang is the mayor, some of us are no better than free prisoners. For years I have been under the sentence of his Law of the Fugitive. His goose stepping troopers have their orders to shoot me down if I try to leave San Pasqual. Should anything happen to me, should El Lobo be unable to escape from jail, the burden of leadership falls upon you. This is Mexico. Your legal authority ended when you crossed the border. But I do not need to tell you that. No more than I need to tell you that Herr Otto Wolfgang is the head of the smuggling gang that has used Buzzard Pass for an underground trail for smuggling aliens and drugs. That the guns and ammunition

run across the border are being stored in his warehouses to be used at some future date when a man in Germany, an insane dictator will name another Der Tag. When and if Der Tag comes, Herr Otto Wolfgang and others like him will make a fanatical and desperate attempt to take Mexico. That is not so impossible as it sounds. Herr Adolf Hitler has hundreds of Otto Wolfgangs in Mexico. They are in all walks of life. Their Nazi teachings are widespread and spreading further like some malignant growth. Hidden under the altar of the mission where El Lobo has cached a big store of guns and cartridges, I have documentary proof of what I say. Proof I have gathered and El Lobo has gathered. Proof I intend turning over to the Presidente of Mexico and to your United States government. This is more than a scouting trip to learn about smuggling that you started on when you were shot down in Buzzard Pass. No?"

Patrol Inspector Mike Irish nodded. "My chief showed me a few letters he'd gotten from Mexico. The letters weren't signed. They were mailed from different border towns. They mentioned Otto Wolfgang and his two sons. They came from San Pasqual. I know now that they were sent by the Fighting Padre of San Pasqual."

"And secretly mailed," nodded the padre, "by El Lobo."

He poured two drinks of brandy and they drank a silent toast. Then the priest led the way into the kitchen. There was a large pantry off the kitchen. A trap door opened the way down a steel stairway into a dark wine cellar. The priest led the way with a lighted candle. Down into the wine cellar. Huge barrels of wine and kegs of brandy. Dusty cobwebbed bottles of wine and brandy lying flat on long racks, against the hard packed adobe walls. He moved one of the racks to reveal a small, cleverly hidden door. They had to crawl through on their hands and knees. The priest swung the wine rack into place and shut the door behind him. Then they crawled through a long damp tunnel that ended in an underground room beneath the altar. Its walls were lined with racks. But they were filled gun racks. Cases of ammunition stacked. There was another steep little stairway and a trap door above.

The padre smiled in the flickering candle light. "Not even the great Herr Otto Wolfgang knows of this tunnel. It was built by the fathers who erected this mission over a hundred years ago. In case of Indian attacks. Its secret handed down among the Franciscan order. Only El Lobo knows of it. And now, you.

"You will be safe here. Wait here until I return or El Lobo comes to you. Here you will be a secret. Before long Dorf and Max and their goose stepping soldiers will be searching my house and the church for you. They will not believe me when I lie to them and tell them you've escaped. It will be my life and the life of El Lobo as well as your own that you will sacrifice in vain if you leave here before the proper time. Bear that in mind if you become impatient. You must wait here until I return. Or until El Lobo comes."

"I'll wait, Padre."

"Bueno." The padre opened the clean flour sack bundle he had fetched from the kitchen. It contained cold food. Tortillas and meat and beans. A bottle of wine. A bottle of brandy. Some candles. A roll of documents wrapped in tanned deerhide.

"You can read them while you wait. They are duplicates of the proof I have against Herr Otto Wolfgang." He smiled faintly and added, "If you tire of reading, my son, prayer might offer you a way of passing the hours. The altar of the mother church shelters you. *Adios."*

IV

THOSE candle lighted hours dragged. Mike Irish was in no mood for prayer by the time he had finished reading the sheaf of documents that proved in ugly de-

tail the almost fanatical subversive actions of Herr Otto Wolfgang and others of his bund. Copies of letters to and from agents in Mexico and Germany. Letters from the agents in the United States. Those agents across the border who bought guns and ammunition and traded them to Otto Wolfgang for smuggled shipments of opium and heroin and other drugs. Another agent who dealt in smuggled aliens. Where other smugglers handled Chinamen, Herr Otto Wolfgang dealt in Germans with Nazi leanings. Carefully selected Nazis who were taken through Buzzard Pass and delivered into the hands of a certain agent who furnished them with false passports and placed them in widely scattered places where they would carry on in their trained subversive methods the undermining of the United States Government. The whole thing was like some slimy crawling beast with thousands of tentacles.

The documents revealed names and aliases of a long list of secret agents and their Nazi hirelings, their places of residence, their occupations in the civil and military life of the United States and in Mexico. What the chief of the Border Patrol had in the way of documentary knowledge was nothing as compared to the proof which Patrol Inspector Mike Irish now read, then carefully wrapped in its buckskin covering and slipped into the leg of his high heeled boot.

Mike had a bad uneasy hour while Dorf and Max Wolfgang and their men searched the church. He could, by climbing the short stairway and listening beneath the heavy trap door, hear them trampling around on the altar, shouting and swearing while they searched for him.

Then they were gone and the time dragged on. Mike ate beans and meat rolled in tortillas and washed the grub down with wine. He went easy on the brandy that was as old or older than he was. It was as smooth as syrup, potent as liquid fire in his veins. He wanted to get out of here. Fight. Do something besides sit in the candle light under a church altar, alone and useless.

Then the trap door over his head opened. A brown robed, brown cowled figure leaned through the opening, outlined in the light of a candle in his lean brown hand.

"Pax vobiscum!" the low toned Latin greeting came down to Mike Irish. "Blow out your light. Do not forget the bottle of brandy, my son!"

Mike Irish blew out his candle. He came up the steep stairway in the darkness with the bottle of brandy. The trap door closed on the floor and he was standing in behind the church altar.

The brown frocked cowled figure turned to face him. The cowl of the faded and patched brown monk's robe fell back. A handsome, black headed face grinned at him.

"That stuff is better than what we drank

together in that shell hole, eh, Sarge? Sergeant Mike the Great Irish!"

"Corp! Cognac Juan!"

Juan Ramirez grabbed the bottle before it slid from Mike's hand.

Mike Irish and Juan Ramirez grabbed one another in a Mexican embrace. Pounding each other's backs. They drank to George Washington's birthday. Mike Irish grinned at the monk clad El Lobo, his brown bare legs, bare feet shoved in rawhide huaraches.

The grin on the Mexican's face faded. He spoke in his Mexican tongue, in a low tone.

Something, he said, had gone wrong with the plan for Willie Garcia and Eddie Brachamonte to go on guard. The two soldiers on guard were not to be trusted. There in the darkened cell, under the pretense of administering the last sacraments of the church to the condemned prisoner, Padre Estaban had changed clothes with El Lobo. The guards had unlocked the cell door. A brown robed figure with bent head had been passed out of the jail in the dark shadows. On the bare bunk in the dark cell a prisoner lay with his head hidden in his arms, the barely visible picture of defeat and sorrow and hopelessness. El Lobo was free in his monk's disguise, but Father Estaban was a prisoner, locked in a cell. Discovered, he would be put to death without delay.

"My men are in the church, Mike. First, we get the priest out of jail. Even if we have to tear the place down."

"That'll spring our trap too quick. Two guards? For Sergeant Mike the Great Irish and Corporal Cognac Juan, another snort of this San Pasqual mission cognac and it'll be like shootin' fish. I thought this El Lobo had a lobo wolf's cunnin'."

Juan Ramirez grinned. "Same old sarge, no?"

El Lobo shed the brown robe and put on clothes little Paco had got from the house where El Lobo lived and fetched to the church.

"My best fiesta charro suit and boots and sombrero. That Paco!" He rolled the brown robe in a tight bundle.

"Where are Herr Otto and his two sons?" asked Mike.

"At the cantina. Drinking plenty. Bullying Dago Tony for his best stuff, free. Tana singing herself hoarse, dancing her beautiful legs weary. *Por Dios!* And everywhere ees them goose stepper soldiers, sticking peons in the pants with bayonets, drunk hounds!"

"Tell your men to scatter around the cantina and handle the goose steppers when we open the jackpot at the cantina. Tell 'em to take it easy and lay low till the sign is right. Let's go."

THE moon was not up. The two guards at the cantina were goose stepping back and forth, bayonets fixed, halting anybody who tried to cross the street. Nobody but Herr Otto and his two sons were allowed to walk across the street, or within a nearer distance to the dimly lighted entrance to the jail.

At the cantina and out on the street near it the citizens of San Pasqual were celebrating this fiesta night. Armed soldiers, most of them partly drunk, were swaggering or staggering around, abusing their authority.

Only that end of the dark street near the jail was deserted.

Mike Irish and El Lobo stood in the black shadows, six-shooters in their hands. Up the street a few of El Lobo's hidden men began shooting off their guns.

"That covers us," whispered Mike Irish. "The taller one is mine."

Their guns cracked at the same instant. Two two guards lurched, stumbled, went down. Mike Irish and El Lobo ran across the street. They dragged the dead guards inside. El Lobo grabbed the big steel ring with the cell keys. He had his brown bundle tucked under his arm. While Mike Irish stood guard El Lobo ran into the dimly lit carcel. A couple of minutes and he came out. Padre Estaban, his robe now bundled under his arm, clad in El Lobo's shabby charro suit and boots, was right behind him.

"I'll change clothes in the dark," said the priest, and disappeared in the black shadows.

"Let's go!" grinned Mike Irish.

Back in the black shadows El Lobo's men sat their horses, their guns in their hands. El Lobo gave them their orders in a low tone. He and Mike Irish went on afoot. Up the street toward the milling crowd in front of the cantina.

A half drunken soldier with a Luger pis-

tol in its holster on his flank lurched into them. He recognized El Lobo and stiffened. He had his Luger pistol out and was starting to shoot when a long bladed knife in El Lobo's left hand sped like a streak of steel light. The sharp blade sank to its hilt in the soldier's bare throat. Blood gushed. The soldier went down, dropping his Luger, clawing with both hands at the knife handle. He made horrible gasping sounds and the blood gushed from his open mouth. His eyes rolled back until the muddy bloodshot whites showed. Then he was dead. El Lobo pulled the knife free and wiped the blood from its blade onto the soiled khaki uniform.

"That Sergeant Pablo Ignacio was an evil man," said El Lobo. "His dirty hands will never again paw at my Tana."

His white teeth flashed in a grin. He led the way from the street and around the rear of the cantina.

"Better," he said to Mike Irish, "that we stop first at the kitchen. To let Mamacita Marcetti know we are here."

At the rear door of the kitchen was a large woodshed. El Lobo motioned Mike back and stepped into the black shed. Mike heard his voice call out cautiously.

"Tejano!"

The lazy drawl of Tex Rhodes gave reply. "About time you showed up, pardner. I'm down to my last quart of that soothin' syrup somebody calls tequila. Wake up, Scotty. Time to rattle our hocks!"

Mike Irish grinned widely. "The Law of the Fugitive, hell!"

"When Mamacita Marcetti," said El Lobo, "comes out weeth Tana, then you and Scotty go een. Sabe?"

"Heap savvy. Howdy, Mike. Long time no see you. Scotty's bin havin' big fits an' little 'uns. Account of us bustin' rules and regulations. This'll read shore purty in that report of his."

Tex Rhodes stood on his long bowed legs. He drained the last drink from a tequila bottle. Then rapped the base of the bottle against the side of the shed. The jagged half that he gripped by its neck made a wicked weapon.

Short, stocky, blunt jawed Scotty had a six-shooter in one hand and a length of wagon spoke in the other.

"Scotty," grinned Tex Rhodes, "hates to git his feet wet. But once he wades into a scrap, keep outa his way."

"This ain't for the weekly report," Mike Irish told them, "but if it goes wrong, I'll take the blame for this *pasear*. See you boys inside. And I'm obliged, plenty. Good luck."

EL LOBO and Mike Irish shoved through the crowd outside. They were inside the cantina before those who had recognized them had gathered their liquor-befuddled wits enough to do anything about it.

"El Lobo!" the name was whispered at first. Then spoken aloud.

"Viva El Lobo!" shouted one of his men. Others took it up. A drunken soldier was knocked down by the flat heavy blade of a machete. Another felt the sharp pointed bite of a steel blade in his back. He dropped his rifle with its fixed bayonet and toppled over onto his face. There were a dozen or more ugly fights starting out on the street by the time El Lobo and Mike Irish walked through the crowded cantina and into the *patio* where candles burning on the tables sent flickering light into the dark shadows.

It was easy enough to spot Herr Wolfgang and his two big sons Dorf and Max. Save for the half dozen heavily armed soldiers whose duty it was to keep everybody out of the *patio* that was commandeered tonight for the mayor of San Pasqual and his tow-headed sons, the *patio* was empty of guests. The other tables were empty, the chairs vacant. Only the candles burned on the table tops, their little flames guttering and dancing.

The vacant tiled floor of the *patio* was ringed by the empty tables. In the middle

of the floor lay a red rose that had been worn in the sleek black hair of the Senorita Tana. Now it lay there, crimson, like something made of fresh blood.

Herr Otto Wolfgang sat back in his private chair. It was a large Mexican made armchair with leather seat and back. His two hundred and fifty pounds of bone and bulky muscle and hard fat layered paunch filled it. His beefy red face with a bone white Heidelberg saber scar, relic of his student saber duelling days, was purplish in the candle light. His Kaiser Wilhelm mustache bristled. His pig-like pale blue eyes were a little bloodshot, cold and merciless. His roached hair erect. On the table in front of him was a bottle of brandy from the wine cellar at the mission. A large glass beside it, half filled. Gripped in one thick hand was a tall Heidelberg stein that held a full quart of the beer he had imported from Germany for his private use.

Herr Otto Wolfgang wore the tailored dress uniform of an officer of the German Reich. Both Dorf and Max were rigged out in similar gray uniforms and both looked surly, half drunk and uncomfortable. They were drinking from the same brandy bottle, taken from the priest's cellar. All three wore holstered Luger pistols. A heavy saber in polished scabbard lay across Herr Otto's knees.

Herr Otto was talking in a deep guttural voice. Talking in German to his two big surly looking sons. Their faces bore the marks of the beating the lanky Tex Rhodes had given them. Their pale eyes were bloodshot, ugly, restless.

Dago Tony Marcetti had come from behind his bar. His dark eyes had a frightened look and his swarthy skin looked grayish as he started across the tiled floor, headed for the kitchen and safety beyond. Dago Tony had sighted El Lobo and Mike Irish. Fear gripped his Italian heart.

Herr Otto Wolfgang left off his growling lecture to his sons.

"*Vass is los,* you Dago? Vere you going in the hurry? Halt! Gut! Tell that accursed daughter of yours to come back now und dance once more." His scowl turned into a heavy, leering grin. He leaned across the big table with its three candles in the center and his purplish red face was coarse and brutal in the flickering light. His voice matched the merciless coldness of his pale blue eyes. A growling, guttural purr.

"You have seen what happens, Italian, to those who disobey his honor their mayor. You have seen your El Lobo, for all his greaser cunning, caught in a baited lobo wolf trap. *Hein!* Und you have found out what it iss like to be locked up in a cell because you have a weakness of the memory, yet. *Jah, wohl, mein* Herr Dago Tony. Und you are weak in the knees now mit fear, eh? *Jah wohl!* Because iff that damned Mike Irish iss not locked in the jail by sunrise, you, *mein* Dago friend will be stood mit your back against the 'dobe wall. My soldiers will fill the belly of Dago Tony mit bullets. Bullets iss not so easy to digest like spaghetti und meat balls."

Herr Otto Wolfgang chuckled heavily. Then licked his thick lips.

"Music, Herr Dago! Send to me that shameless young wench who has made fools of these two sons of mine. It iss for the mayor of San Pasqual she dances this time. For a man. Not for young fools, wet yet behind their donkey ears. Perhaps, *mein* Herr Dago Tony, if I am pleased mit her, I take her to my house. When I am tired mit her, I give her then to the soldiers."

Herr Otto Wolfgang banged the table with his heavy fist. His growling was a deep, ominous rumble.

"Quick, dog! Send your Tana wench to dance for Herr Otto Wolfgang, mayor of San Pasqual. So dot El Lobo makes a fiesta day of George Washington's birthday, eh! I make a change in der plans. El Lobo sweats and stinks in der jail. Mit him before morning sweats blood also dot Mike Irish. Gott strike such riffraff! *Du,*

Dorf! *Du,* Max! Tonight I remove that young girl who makes fools of you. I show dot wench the difference between damned young fools und a man. By *Himmel!* Und who iss more man than me, Otto Wolfgang?"

His small pig-like eyes glittered coldly as he lifted his heavy stein. The six guards with their rifles, bayonets fixed, stiffened under his bleak stare.

"Drink!" he snapped at his two scowling sons. "Drink to Der Fuehrer! *Heil* Hitler! To the new World Order!"

Herr Otto Wolfgang heaved his big bulk from his chair. His saber clanking, stein lifted in the Nazi salute. Dorf and Max stood up, bootheels clicking, glasses raised.

Mike Irish and El Lobo looked at one another, there in the shadows. Grinned and nodded.

Tex Rhodes and Scotty had come in by another door. They stood now in the black shadowed *patio* with Mike Irish.

A score or more of drunken soldiers filled the lighted cantina. The half dozen armed guards stood with fixed bayonets, waiting orders.

"I'll take the biggest 'un's glass," whispered Mike. "Tex, you empty the other glass. El Lobo wants the beer stein. Watch the cantina door, Scotty. Ready! Aim! Shoot!"

THREE .45 six-shooters roared. The upraised glasses of brandy were shattered to bits. El Lobo's bullet smashed the big stein as its rim touched Herr Otto's open mouth.

"Viva Jorge Washeenton!" yelled El Lobo. "Viva Mike the Great Irish! Viva El Lobo!"

Stunned into sudden sobriety, Herr Otto Wolfgang stood there, the handle and its hinged pewter lid of the stein still gripped in his hand, beer spilled down his gray uniform, staining the cloth across his big belly. His heavy face was grayish, mottled.

Dorf and Max looked yellowish gray in the flickering candle light. Their pale eyes were glazed, bloodshot.

There was a long moment while the heavy gun echoes and El Lobo's shout died out.

Herr Otto Wolfgang and his two sons stood in the candle light. Their staring eyes tried to pierce the black shadows to locate their enemies. Their hands dropped to their Luger automatics, sliding the pistols free of the German made holsters.

"Drop your guns!" barked Mike Irish. "In the name of the United States and Mexico! You're under arrest! Surrender!"

Out in the cantina the drunken soldiers tried to sober up fast. Their gun barrels glinted in the dim, smoke laden light.

The half dozen guards had their rifles swung to their shoulders, ready to shoot, waiting for the command to fire. Long months of hard drilling had schooled those six picked guards. Dorf and Max and Herr Otto had managed to drill into their peon skulls something of the Nazi brutality and lust to kill. They were not afraid. There was cruelty in the glitter of their hard eyes and it was stamped on their dark wooden faces. They were more Yaqui than Mexican. Many of the drunken soldiers in the cantina were of the same strong Yaqui mixed strain. El Lobo had pointed certain guards out to Mike Irish. Calling Mike's attention to the light color of their eyes and hair. Yaquis, yes, but with a cross of white man's blood. Not all of Herr Otto's sons, remarked El Lobo, bore the name of Wolfgang.

It was to those picked guards Herr Otto Wolfgang now barked harsh, guttural orders in German. Ordering them to shoot. At the same instant his heavy booted foot sent the table over with a crash, knocking out the candle lights. Plunging the *patio* into darkness. Guns roared. Men would die before their eyes focused to see in the pale white light that bathed the *patio* from the rising full moon.

It was every man for himself now. Tex

Rhodes and Scotty needed no orders. Back to back for the first few seconds, they fought with Mike Irish and El Lobo. And because they had stayed there in the black shadows their eyes were already focused to the darkness and moonlight and their aim was accurate and deadly.

The roar of guns was deafening. Through it filtered the cowboy yipping of Tex Rhodes. The wild battle cry of El Lobo. Mike Irish and Scotty fought in grim silence.

"Keep 'em off our backs, Tex," Mike Irish had barked at his Border Patrol men, "you and Scotty. El Lobo and I will take on the Wolfgang tribe."

Tex and Scotty had picked the six guards for their first targets. As Mike Irish and El Lobo went into the *patio,* crouched, six-

shooters spewing streaks of flame, Mike knew that his two men who were taking what Tex called a little pleasure *pasear* into Mexico, were not wasting any bullets. Mike and El Lobo had their backs protected.

DORF was down on all fours, grunting with pain, squeezing the trigger of his Luger automatic that was spitting rapid streaks of fire. He was coughing from the powder smoke and when he coughed the blood spilled from his mouth.

Max was crouched behind the heavy overturned table. He had used up one clip of cartridges, snapped out the empty clip and shoved a filled one into his Luger. He was panting like a spent runner and his shooting was wild.

Herr Otto Wolfgang stood with his broad back flattened against the adobe wall of the *patio.* Back in the black shadows that hid his huge bulk. His heavy German cavalry saber was gripped in his left hand and his other hand held his Luger. Herr Otto was holding his fire, blinking his pale eyes into focus, watching for a sure target before he revealed his position by the flash of his gun.

Dorf let out a grunt as a bullet from Mike's six-shooter tore through his chest. He was dead when his head thudded against the old tile floor.

El Lobo charged headlong at the overturned table and flung it aside. Max screamed hoarsely. El Lobo's .45 roared and its heavier calibered explosion drowned out the sharper crack of Max's Luger. El Lobo's lead slug struck Max in the face and tore the back of his skull away.

"Viva El Lobo!" The Mexican was on his feet, crouched.

Herr Otto Wolfgang's Luger spat. El Lobo stumbled, jerked sideways by the hard impact of a bullet, and went down.

Mike Irish fired at the flash of Herr Otto's gun. Thumbed back the hammer of his single action .45 and pulled the trigger. There was no spurt of flame, no jerking recoil. Mike's gun was empty. He dove headlong as Herr Otto fired at him. Dove along the floor to where El Lobo moved, crawling. He yanked the one time corporal of the A. E. F. in behind the overturned table.

"Dig in, Corp. Flatten out. Got a loaded gun? Gimme."

Paco had managed to steal El Lobo's pair of silver handled six-shooters for his hero. One of those guns was empty. The other held six cartridges. Mike Irish slid the loaded gun from El Lobo's holster.

Max's dead body and the heavy round table gave the wounded El Lobo shelter. Mike muttered into the Mexican's ear to lie flat.

Then Mike Irish crouched and sprang. As he quit the shelter of the big table Herr Otto's Luger cracked. The bullet nicked Mike's shoulder, but he never felt

its bite. He never slacked his headlong charge until he collided with Herr Otto's paunchy bulk there in the darkness. The cavalry saber swished past Mike's head, missing him by inches. Had it landed it would have severed his rusty colored head.

Herr Otto had grunted as Mike's lowered head butted him in the paunch. The crashing impact threw the big German off balance and the adobe wall kept him from falling.

Mike's head felt like it had been driven back through his neck and shoulders. He staggered, caught his balance as he caromed off the big bulk of the German. The Luger cracked and burning powder stung Mike's face. Then the silver handled six-shooter was roaring and its soft nosed slugs were tearing into the paunchy belly and thick chest of Herr Otto Wolfgang. The toppling bulk of the mayor of San Pasqual crashed into Mike and sent him sprawling backwards.

THE yellow light in the cantina was dimmed by gunpowder smoke. The shooting in there and the din of shouting was dying out. Wounded soldiers were groaning and yelling that they had enough fighting. El Lobo's men were taking some of them prisoners, shooting others they hated.

Out in the street the deep bell toned voice of Father Estaban, the Fighting Priest of San Pasqual, was warning all the soldiers out there to throw away their guns. The padre was bringing peace out of chaos. Unarmed, his faded brown robe spattered with fresh blood from the wounded and dying he'd cared for, Padre Estaban came into the cantina. At his loud command the shooting and stabbing ceased.

"Where are you, Mike?" that was Scotty's voice, cold and calm and steady. "Sing out if you're alive!"

"Mike the Great Irish," sounded the unmistakable voice of El Lobo, "ees too tough to keel. Where ees that Tejano?"

"Straddle of somethin' that feels like one of them 'dobe guards. He's so dead he's commencin' to stink. I kinda pulled up lame a while back. Where the hell is Mike Irish?"

"Crawlin' out from under Herr Otto's carcass. He's as heavy as that dead horse back in Buzzard Pass. Take a look at the corporal, Scotty. He stopped one."

"Notheen," called El Lobo, "but a lilly hole een a shoulder. Who's got a corkscrews? Corporal Cognac Juan, all the way through hell an' high waters and he comes op weeth always a bottle. Ees the wan Herr Otto don' use no more. But the son of a gon he push a cork een hard. Where ees a corkscrews, Sarge? Viva Jorge Washeenton's birthday. The Savior of the United States! The great Americano Saint! Twenty years we wait for thees night, me, Corporal Cognac Juan and hees buddy Sergeant Mike the Great Irish! Viva!"

Candles were lighted. There was a Mexican doctor who had plenty of experience with gunshot and knife wounds. The priest was equally skilled.

Dago Tony Marcetti, gold earrings in his ears, tears welled in his red brown eyes, talking and gesturing, serving free drinks from behind his bullet scarred bar.

Tana helped the doctor and the padre dress El Lobo's wounded shoulder. The steel jacket Luger bullet had drilled a clean hole through the muscle without breaking a bone.

Then Tex Rhodes' bullet ripped thigh was dressed and bandaged and the doctor found three slight bullet wounds in Mike Irish's tough hide. Scotty had come through the battle without so much as a scratch.

Over at the barbecue pits the women of San Pasqual worked and chattered. Youngsters of all sizes and ages played around the huge bonfire under the trees. The mission bell rang without stopping, relays of small boys swinging on the thick rawhide bell rope. The brass cannon boomed. Hundreds of candles burned inside the old

mission. The prayer lights in front of the carved wooden statue of the Lady of Guadalupe. Black clad, shawled women knelt in prayer. Tears and prayer inside. And outside, the fiesta, its music and laughter.

THERE was a special mass at midnight. Preceding the mass for the dead and wounded, a wedding.

The banns of marriage had been announced weeks before. And tonight before the hour of midnight marked the end of the birthday of George Washington, Tana Marcetti became the bride of Juan Ramirez.

The storehouses of guns and ammunition, the priest told Patrol Inspector Mike Irish, would be turned over to the Mexican and United States governments. The money left behind by Herr Otto Wolfgang would be distributed among the poor.

The doors of the cells in the jail were unlocked and thrown open. Soldiers had burned their uniforms in the big bonfire and were wearing the more peaceful garments of ordinary life. Enmities were drowned in wine. Guitars strummed. Voices sang gay ranchero songs. The voice of Tana sounded clear and gay above the others.

Mike Irish and Juan Ramirez found the big Nazi flag and carried it to the big bonfire. With it burned the name El Lobo.

El Lobo was dead. Juan Ramirez was elected amid a roar of cheering, the new mayor of San Pasqual.

Thus Washington's Birthday at San Pasqual came to its colorful close.

The following day Patrol Inspector Mike Irish and his two Border Patrol officers Tex Rhodes and Scotty, rode back through Buzzard Pass to their camp. With the Patrol Inspector went the buckskin wrapped documents he would turn over to his chief.

The dangerous gap of Buzzard Pass was closed. El Lobo had smuggled only guns and ammunition. No aliens or dope. Mike Irish, Patrol Inspector, told Scotty to write that into his report. And the name El Lobo was marked off the books as Officially Dead.

Patrol Inspector Mike Irish reported in person to his chief. Along with the documents in their buckskin sheath Mike Irish handed over a thick leather bound volume. Its title in gilt letters was *"Mein Kampf."* There was a brief presentation inscription by its author written on the flyleaf. Presented to Herr Otto Wolfgang by Adolf Hitler.

"The Fightin' Padre of San Pasqual," said Mike Irish, "sent it to you. He said it was written by a locoed paperhanger. But that there would come a day before many years passed when the whole world would know the name of this Hitler hombre and that the bloodstains on the book was prophetic. Let's have a look in that dictionary of yours, Chief. I'm stumped on that word 'prophetic'."

The chief scowled at the book with its handsome leather cover marred by dried brown bloodstains. He was thinking of some confidential and secret reports from Washington he had on file.

"Your Fighting Padre of San Pasqual," he voiced his thoughts, "might turn out to be somethin' of a prophet."

Then he looked up. A slow grin spread across his face.

"When do you want that vacation you was growlin' about, Mike?"

"I done had it, Chief. Celebrated proper at San Pasqual. But I'll take a re-ride some day. I don't know when. I'm to be there in person at the official christenin' of young George Washington Mike the Great Irish Ramirez. Godfather."

Curioddities BY Weill

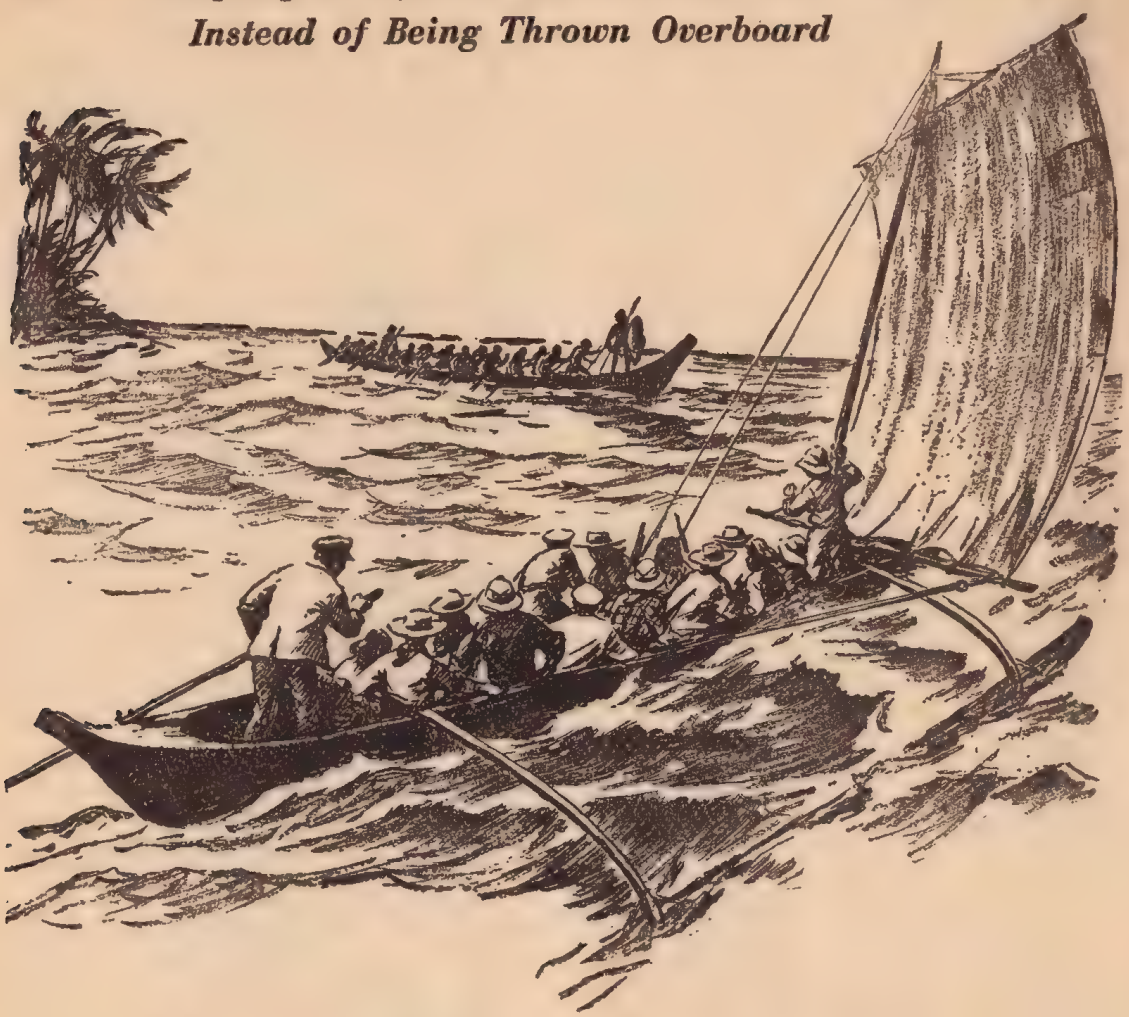
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOMING PIGEON IN WARFARE HAS BEEN UNDERSTOOD SINCE BRUTUS, BESIEGED BY ANTONY DISPATCHED A PIGEON TO OCTAVIUS FOR REINFORCEMENTS. THE DUTCH BROUGHT THE BIRDS TO CENTRAL EUROPE FOR THE WARS IN THE NETHERLANDS, AND WILLIAM THE SILENT USED THOUSANDS OF THEM AT THE SIEGE OF HAARLEM IN 1573

VICTORIA BECAME QUEEN OF ENGLAND IN 1837, LESS THAN ONE MONTH AFTER HER EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY! HER ASSASSINATION WAS ATTEMPTED ON **SIX** OCCASIONS

AMONG QUADRUPEDS, MEMBERS OF THE **CAT** FAMILY RANK FIRST IN PERFECTION OF FORM BECAUSE OF THEIR GRACE AND MUSCULAR AGILITY

IS A PARROT THE ONLY BIRD THAT TALKS? *See Curioddities next time.*

Even a Bungling Navigator, if Plausible, Was Still Tolerated Instead of Being Thrown Overboard



NAVIGATION SIMPLIFIED

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

TARRANT was solid, deeply tanned, and clear eyed. For a beachcomber, Jim Tarrant was certainly presentable, and the hard-drinking Netherlanders of Pulau Besar seemed to have hit upon the answer: "That home-made *arrak* would gag anyone, he takes just enough of it to get him to the point of feeling damn good and sorry for himself. What he needs is somthing to do and to worry about."

And now the entire settlement had plenty to worry about; so much so that they ignored Tarrant, who had warned them. He began to wish he had left with his friends, the Malay fishermen, during the night. Being ignored made him sorry for himself, as usual.

Jan Dekker, the *posthouder,* said to the twenty-odd men who sat on the counters and on packing cases, "When the stock of trade goods is gone, we either have to leave or else be sure we can defend ourselves for the duration."

Adolph Maartens brushed back his shock of sandy hair and laughed sourly as he faced the lean and leathery *posthouder.* He gestured at the shelves, and

included the storerooms, and the bales of rattan which the kinky-haired head hunters had brought from the interior.

"If my stock is all there is between us and hell, I think we had better start swimming."

A hatchet-faced Australian asked his comrade, "What's he saying? It doesn't sound good." His companion, who had a better command of Netherlands, interpreted, adding, "He's bloody well right. When Malays start slipping out, it's time to follow suit."

Maartens turned and picked Tarrant from the farther side of the group. "If this draft dodger or fugitive or whatever he is had let us know—"

Tarrant reddened, and took two steps forward.

"I didn't know they were leaving so suddenly."

The storekeeper snorted. "Probably not, or you'd gone with them. Or wouldn't they have you?"

"Ali asked me," the American snorted. "I had my chance."

Jan Dekker, representing what law and government remained in that isolated reach of the Indies, raised a lean hand. "Never mind blame or argument! We could not —let me say, we *would not* have seized their boats." His fierce eyes gleamed beneath white brows; his shifting glance nailed the key men of the little settlement. "Those days are gone. Even if Mynheer Tarrant had been sober enough to notify us, we would not have seized any Malay boats. Now let us have something constructive."

"Guvnor, why in hell don't you suggest something? You're the *posthouder,*" Sims, the red-headed Australian demanded.

Dekker smiled enough to relieve the hardness of his uncompromising mouth. "First I listen to you, to all of you, before I tell you what is to be done."

He heard patiently the blend of panic, ill-timed defiance, impracticable schemes of defense against the beetle-browed Papuan head hunters of the interior. And Jim Tarrant knew that his draft dodger's paradise had become a mirage.

PULAU BESAR, midway between the Jap-infested Moluccas and Jap-occupied Timor, had for several years sheltered him, and even after Pearl Harbor, the island was a cozy haven. Tarrant had a grudge against the government, his own government, which, as he saw things, had sold him down the river. So, in this outlying bit of the Indies, which Jap cruisers and bombers considered unworthy of their attention, Tarrant had coddled his grudge and his self pity.

Until the Japs swooped down on Java and Timor and Sumatra, a K. P. M. steamer called once every eight weeks to pick up tortoise shell, *agag-agar,* rattan and *trepang.* It brought mail, and supplies and trade goods—calico, knives, fish hooks, stick tobacco for barter with the wild Papuans of the interior. And now, with shelves almost depleted, the trading post proprietor could not bargain with the savages when they came to town.

"Don't barter with the bloody beggars!" the Australian prospectors decided; an idea whose English expression most of the Netherlanders understood, or had already phrased in their own language. "Just close the place."

All eyes centered on the *posthouder.* Dekker said, "The steamer has missed two calls! Since the Malays could not help us, they left so as not to see our end. The only hope is that the Papuan brain—" He made a cutting gesture with right index finger against left thumb. "About this size, or a little smaller—will take a while to grasp the point."

A guffaw greeted this first cheering bit. Even Tarrant chuckled, and the missionary moved over toward him, to make him feel somewhat more like a white man. But Dekker, like so many of his nation, was a realist and not a wish thinker. He added,

"Do not forget, gentlemen, that what a Papuan lacks in brains, he makes up in animal instinct."

Tarrant cleared his throat, and took an uncertain step forward. The missionary's implied friendliness smoothed some of the awkwardness of the start: "We can build a boat and make for Australia."

Someone made a derisive sound. Dekker however interposed, "We are less concerned with a man's past than we are with his future. Mr. Tarrant, can you navigate?"

"I came from the Philippines in a Buginese *prahu*. Between us, we can piece together enough navigation to get us to Port Darwin."

Albeit risky, that sounded reasonable enough, until the *posthouder* learned that not another man of the group had even Tarrant's skimpy knowledge. "Don't worry too much, men, and don't get your families excited. Before we can face the perils of the sea, we'll first have to survive what comes from the land."

A battered *prahu,* abandoned by the Malays, served as a model; the jungle offered trees large enough, and there were sufficient hand tools. Dekker, at once admitting the wisdom of making a large dugout according to the proportions of the model, told the men of the settlement, "We could risk ribs and planks and perhaps get something which would be seaworthy. And again, we might not. Unless Yut Li and Ah Wong have blueprints for a junk, we follow Malay design."

Since the two Chinese merchants had no suggestions, a tree was felled and manhandled to the beach.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS claim that certain primitive races cannot count higher than five, others no more than ten, with twenty as the upper limit; but the shock headed Papuans, regardless of theories, had a clear concept of fifty-six, for on the day when the steamer should have anchored out in the bay, the knotty muscled savages arrived from the interior to trade.

Dekker, not being an anthropologist, was prepared. Tarpaulins and empty cases concealed the partly shaped hull on the beach, and on the face of things, Pulau Besar was normal. Everyone, however, had blistered palms, and whoever owned a pistol carried it in his pocket.

Though the aborigines were odorous enough, Tarrant could also smell trouble. There was a new gleam in those cunning little Papuan eyes. The thick lips had an insolent twist, and the flaring nostrils twitched as though they had half-scented a change in the white settlement. Someone muttered, "Naturally, they miss the Malays. That's a dead giveaway."

Dekker was in his official bungalow. Yut Li and Ah Wong were in their little shops. Luden, the missionary, waited as usual in the dispensary behind the church. But the half-dozen women and children were in the old blockhouse.

With not a radio in operation for some months, the white settlement had lost all touch with the world. When the K. P. M. steamer for the third time missed her scheduled stop, it was clear that something had gone wrong all the way from Sumatra to Timor, and that the fall of Singapore had been only the beginning of calamity. Where the absence of bombers and cruisers had made the war an unreality to Tarrant, the long continued absence of the inter-island steamer began to bring the conflict closer. And now, watching the clucking savages crowd into the trading post, he realized for the first time that law had left the Indies.

True, their stone axes and their carved clubs were at the fringe of the jungle, along with the spears tipped with cassowary bone; they still obeyed the law which, in terms of their logic, was a tabu proclaimed centuries ago by Jan Dekker's predecessors, and terribly enforced by soldiers and gun-bearing ships. Though they suspected that the power backing the tabu had faded, they still lacked the courage to test their

suspicion. They wanted hatchets, they wanted knives, they wanted canned goods. Maartens, bluff and hearty, told them that the steamer, arriving ahead of time and leaving early, had left only calico and tobacco, and very little of either. "And how about some mirrors?"

But the story was falling flat, and Tarrant began to get a taste of the war he had evaded in advance. His own government had sold him down the river, several years previous, when "good neighbor" legislation, favoring vegetable oils from Brazil, had killed the copra and cocoanut oil business of the Philippines. And rather than accept the hospitality of natives who had once looked up to him as the owner of a prosperous plantation, Tarrant had sailed away with a Buginese skipper, finally landing in Pulau Besar. There, with home-made *arrak* to help dramatize his troubles, he had enjoyed the role of draft evader.

Looking from the veranda of the trading post, Tarrant saw that suspicion would quickly become certainty. Three Papuans, fully armed, were rounding the headland and creeping toward the tarpaulin and the heap of cases which camouflaged the partly completed dugout. To give an alarm would take too long, moreover, every white man in the settlement would dash to the water front and leave the settlement exposed to whatever other armed savages might be lurking on the landward side.

Casually, loitering along, he headed down the path; and in spite of the revolver in his hip pocket, he did not particularly like his task. Each step away from his fellows made him more uneasy, more and more conscious of the unpleasant aspects of the isolation he had so long sought.

Once below the level of the town, he broke into a run. The three Papuans, hearing the thud of his feet in the sand, whirled from their objective.

"Get away!" he shouted, gesturing.

They stood there, grinning insolently. White prestige had taken a long drop in the past six months. One hefted a stone axe. Another, spear in hand, continued on his way toward the camouflaged hull. Already, they must have seen, from that short distance, that this was not a straggling heap of freshly loaded merchandise.

"Get away!" he repeated, hesitating to use his revolver against Papuans who had only primitive weapons.

The man nearest the cache made a quick gesture. Tarrant had heard of Papuan slingers, and he had seen them, but never in action. Almost as quickly as one could draw and fire a pistol, the knotty legged giant had whisked a stone the size of a baseball.

Tarrant flung himself flat, and with little time to spare. The sound of the heavy missile's passing told him how narrowly he had missed a fatal wound. Barely flat on the sand, he drew his revolver, firing from rest.

He drilled his man squarely. The other two fled, howling.

There was no shooting in the settlement. With pistols, shotguns, and two rifles confronting them, the aborigines had no choice but to withdraw. By the time Tarrant reached the level of the store, the place was clear of Papuans; but he liked neither the looks nor the mutterings of the men he faced.

"If you're so anxious to fight, you could have picked a better time and place than this," they reminded him.

"If you'd been keeping your eyes open," he retorted, "you could have headed them off before they got close enough to see that we're building a boat."

Jan Dekker remained neutral. "Two got away, do you say? Then you may depend upon it, they all know by now. So let us stop this everlastingly-damned argument before it starts. There is a boat to be built."

He did not add that, in view of the weeks which had passed without the arrival of any supplies, the settlement would have to live off the country; and that the country was now alive with Papuans who, sensing

the end of law and order, would collect whatever heads they could, and renew their acquaintance with long pig. All this was too plain for discussion.

And as he sweated with adze and chisel, Tarrant did not know whether he had or had not used his head, down there on the beach. He was sure of nothing other than that his hands were horribly blistered, that he ached in more muscles than he ever had suspected himself of having, and that the Japs might as well have bombed and shelled Pulau Besar.

Though he was not really conscious of the fact, Tarrant had quite forgotten to curse the skillet-heads who had ruined the copra business. However, he might have got around to that routine, later in the evening, had Jan Dekker not furnished an antidote: "A guard must be posted at the hull as well as at the blockhouse. Line up and draw lots."

Everyone but the two Chinese had suggestions, brilliant ones, on guard duty. But the *posthouder,* after listening patiently, simplified matters a good deal. "Just stay awake and on your posts. No drinking, sociable or otherwise—Tarrant, I mean you, too! Since this is not an army, I cannot tell you that sleeping sentries will be shot. Still I can assure you that sleeping sentries will be eaten. Good night, gentlemen."

THERE was no attack that night, and none during the shaping of the hull, or the stepping of the mast. She had a square sail, like a Moro *vinta.*

No champagne for the launching. She was long and slim, without any keel; outriggers kept her from capsizing. For a chronometer, there was the *posthouder's* watch. For charts, his atlas, and a 1904 edition of a British Admiralty pilot book, dug out of a corner of the trading post. One of the Australian prospectors had a prismatic marching compass.

Tarrant, meanwhile, had been solving problems of his own. Buginese navigation was based on principles contained in manuals written in that obscure language. Where he had expected elementary sea knowledge among at least a few others of the settlement, he found that every man, from the *posthouder* down, had cheerfully dumped the responsibility on him. What had started as a suggestion for public consideration had ended as a personal responsibility. So, during the completion of the war canoe, Tarrant had been at work.

He was tempted to confess to Luden, the missionary, but thought better of it. Instead, he said boldly, "There's probably not a sextant between here and Timor, and probably not even a surveyor's theodolite."

Mynheer Luden nodded. "That is true. But the old mariners steered by the stars, and we have a compass. After all, we do not expect frills, *Mynheer* Tarrant, the Buginese method you know is good enough for us."

Tarrant was thinking, "Yeah, swell, until we wander around in circles, and run out of rations and water, and then who'll they be lynching?" He said, "Maybe you have some drafting instruments, a protractor?"

"But of course. Right here."

So he set to work with an aluminum dishpan, wire, and a piece of gas pipe. What he finally carried aboard was something he hoped would pass for an astrolabe.

The women, crowding amidships with the half dozen children who had not been sent back to the Netherlands to go to school, cried out against the impossibility of living in such a cramped space. Jan Dekker said, grimly, "As we run out of rations, there will be more room to stretch your legs, ladies."

Dekker was in command, by virtue of age and rank. Tarrant's job was merely to set the course. "And," Dekker whispered to him, once they were under way, "to be thrown overboard if something goes wrong. And I will be next."

Tarrant glanced back at the settlement, which Dekker had ordered set afire, so that

nothing could by any chance serve the enemy. "Better than being eaten," he retorted.

She knifed the water. Once well from the lee of the headland, she raced along, spray drenching the closely packed passengers. Tacking was a simple business, for with both ends alike, either could be bow, or stern. Luckily, no heads were cracked when the boom came about. But she had scarcely made three cable lengths beyond the bar when Sims, the carrot-topped Australian yelled, "Look there! A whole bloody navy!"

Two Papuan war canoes were converging from port and starboard. Apparently they had been waiting to catch the refugees all packed in a vibrating hull, too cramped for defense of concealment. Or perhaps, with their walnut-sized brains, they had reasoned that once the whites left the tabu-protected settlement, their magic would fail.

Their oiled black bodies gleamed in the beating sun. Leaf shaped paddles flashed, and wooden drums set the cadence. From the deck of a destroyer, the spectacle would have been beautiful to see.

For a while, it seemed that sail and the Malay pirate hull would win. With a Buginese crew, and all the canvas she could carry, it would not even have been an interesting bet. But here, amateurs were competing with experts. And the black men, beyond any doubt, felt that they had to cut off the fugitives so that there could not be any future vengeance.

Bone tipped arrows began to rake the bulwarks as the Papuans narrowed the gap. Black slingers cut loose with rocks polished round in torrent beds.

"Heads down!" Dekker shouted, rather needlessly. Then, "Who can shoot?"

"I ain't bad, Guvnor," Sims answered, and Pitt, the other Australian, admitted no greater incompetence. "But the way she pitches don't help."

One pointed port, one to starboard; the ripping whack of the two rifles made a long drawn sound. Dekker, spotting with his binoculars, shouted, "Good! Both good!"

But a realistic Chinese trader observed, "Still come too damn fast."

And the gap in the rank of rowers was filled up. Tarrant said, "They've got more men than we have ammunition."

No doubt that Sims and Pitt were handy. Neither arrows nor sling stones shook their aim. Not even the scream of a woman nailed by a bone-headed shaft made them flinch. Dekker, however, said, "We are short of cartridges."

"Hell, Guvnor! We won't have any more if we wait till they overhaul us."

Someone shouted to the women, "Quit that screaming!"

Dekker nudged Tarrant. "Bad case of nerves. Wish we had another dozen Australians."

A sling stone bounced off the taut sail. Another, dish-shaped instead of spherical, cut a hole. The canvas began to tear. With the least freshening of the wind, there would be a ripping, and the race would end.

Dekker's lips were knife-thin. "If you know any other Buginese customs, my lad, let us hear them within the next couple seconds."

Tarrant was breaking out hatchets and knives. Pistols and shotguns were served to their owners. Each tack gave the Papuans a definite advantage

Then Tarrant said, "Dekker, one chance. Make for the nearest boat, to hell with running, close in on one!"

As he spoke, he dug for the tin of home-made alcohol which was to feed the little stove amidships, and slashed its top.

Dekker shouted to the man at the sweep, "I'm not crazy, do as I say!"

Sims and Pitt grinned. The redhead said, "If we get across their bow, maybe we can string four of them with one bullet!"

The Netherlanders had tightened up, stubborn and silent, no longer shaken by the moan of the woman nailed by an ar-

row. The two Chinese were blank faced as they crouched with their hatchets. Nobody paid much attention to Tarrant. The helmsman groaned, dropped. Luden took the helm to put her hard aport. If the missionary was praying, he did not look it.

The tack was good. One outrigger in the air, one deep in the water, and the sail catching hell; but not ripping. Not yet.

"Now!"

Rifles whacked. Shotguns bellowed. Pistols smacked and roared, and for a moment, the flight of arrows and stones had to cease. The war canoe lost way as paddlers dropped. Then, when it seemed that the outrigger would foul the enemy's prow, Tarrant flicked a cigarette lighter and heaved the slashed can of alcohol.

The fire ball landed among the enemy, scattering flaming fuel. Dekker followed up with three beer bottles amidship. The archers and the slingers and the paddlers neglected their work; for the blazing alcohol floated on the water the fast running canoe had shipped. And her crew was too tightly jammed for good dodging.

Sims shouted, "See how *you* like roast meat!"

The Malay *prahu* came about, and now the other Papuan canoe was pulling nearer. "Get the drummer!" Tarrant shouted. "Pick him off!"

Pitt frowned. "You don't like their bloody music?"

"Pick him off, damn it!" Tarrant howled. "Break their beat!"

The Australian's second shot did it. And whether the cessation of the war drum, or the fire flinging which had demoralized the near canoe, the fact remained that the Papuans began to lag further and further astern.

Luden relinquished the helm. "That poor woman with a barbed arrow in her arm," he muttered, and dug into the supplies.

The anesthetic was four ounces of brandy. Taken in a few gulps, the patient was practically paralyzed. The missionary forced the shaft home until it appeared on the other side, its barbs tearing all the way. Tarrant leaned over the side, and when he looked back, wiping his chin, Luden had cut the arrow head, and could thus withdraw the shaft.

"I guess that hurt me more than it did her," he muttered, and went astern.

There he found Dekker white faced and coughing blood. He turned to shout to Luden, but the *posthouder* caught his arm. "No use. This is one he can't shove through. Call Maartens and Doorn."

These were the *posthouder's* two cronies, and next to him, the oldest residents of Pulau Besar. When they saw him, and the result of the farewell volley from the second canoe, they tried to tell him of cases where men had recovered. But Dekker snorted. "Shut up, you two fools. Listen to me, you are witnesses." He coughed, a gush of blood choked him. "This Tarrant—no one thinks much of him—maybe they are right—but he's the only man—who can—navigate—I leave him—in command—of—"

"But—see here, Jan—" Maartens protested.

Dekker persisted, "One eyed man—is king—among the blind—damn it—you can't—navigate—at all. Shut up. Do—as I say."

And though he lived for some minutes, Dekker could not say any more. When the missionary learned what had happened, he said, "You should have told me. The other wounded could wait."

Tarrant shook his head. "Reverend, the only consolation he wanted was knowing you were taking care of those you could save."

On paper, the Banda Sea is small, and crowded with islands; and the Timor Sea looked just as easy, but before many days had passed, Tarrant began to worry. Islands were totally lacking, and both water and food were running low.

A *prahu* manned by Buginese sailors

apparently made three times as much way as a similar craft handled by landlubbers. Tarrant's own misgivings had made him ration water almost from the start, and thus he had handicaped himself with thirsty and doubting people.

"Where's those bloody islands you said you'd have a hard time dodging?" Sims demanded.

THE Netherlanders, though they kept a stoical silence, had the same question in their bloodshot eyes and drawn faces. The *prahu* was no longer crowded. Nearly every arrow wound had led to a fatal infection, in spite of the missionary's first aid kit. "Poison," he told Tarrant, one night. "But I didn't have the heart to tell them. Probably they knew, and tried to believe they'd be exceptions."

Tarrant's astrolabe was a wonderful thing to see. The azimuth circle had been scribed on the bottom of an aluminum dishpan. The column was a piece of gas pipe.

The telescope, a bit of copper tubing, was wired to the straight-edge of a draftsman's protractor, to which was attached a plumb bob.

He shot the sun. He shot stars. He consulted the Buginese manual. Unhappily, for all his thumbing of the Admiralty Pilot, 1904 edition, there was no landfall.

Pitt, taking up Sims' refrain, demanded, "Where's those bloody islands you told us about, with lots of tucker and water?"

Tarrant carefully set the astrolabe down. "I cannot call this mutiny. Any sea lawyer could prove that my being put in command was irregular. But the first island we reach, I'll beat the living hell out of both of you!"

"Chum, take off that gun, and have at it."

Tarrant shook his head. "A *prahu* is too crowded. If I thought you could navigate any better—want to try it?"

They eyed each other and the weird astrolabe. "We can't read Buginese tables."

A SQUALL carried away mast and half the sail. Bamboo and rattan, stolen from the outrigger struts, furnished what an optimist might have called a jury rig. "It is better than paddling," Tarrant contended, "particularly since we don't have paddles."

When they did sight an island, it proved to be rich in guano, devoid of vegetation, and without any water. Flying fish and a shark stretched the scanty rations. Tarrant, regarding the gaunt and hollow eyed passengers, could see that they eased their misery by telling each other that this was his idea; that his bluff and brag had induced them to leave a blockhouse which they might have defended, and in whose immediate vicinity they might have foraged. They at least would have had water aplenty.

He sustained himself by thinking, "They've got to blame someone. They're sorry for themselves."

Now that supplies were dismayingly low, he knew that there had to be a guard against pilfering from the stores. The passengers would be short sighted enough to express their resentment by stealing. More and more often, he had to say, "I am sorry, but a child does not get any more thirsty than a grown person. A ration is a ration."

Luden said, one day, "You can't keep it up, with just cat-naps. Let me watch. You need sleep."

"No, Reverend. They'll wheedle you out of water for the kids."

Luden had no answer. Tarrant napped at times, but never for long. He would awaken, shocked from a sleep in which passengers crept upon him to steal; and then, awake, he would see that none had moved from their places. Sometimes he thought that Jan Dekker was saying to him, "Don't be afraid of them, they know the supplies have to be rationed."

Dekker's presence became very real. He knew now that he was in command only because of Jan Dekker's final words. But

he also knew that beyond a certain point, a dead man's will and courage could not sustain people who suffered far more from fear and doubt than from actual hardship.

When a squall pelted rain into the bellied remnant of the sail, and doubled the water supply, there should have been an easing of tension, but there was nothing of the kind. Maartens and Doorn and the two Australians came to him and said, "We're not getting anywhere. We're going in circles. No matter what way we went, a straight course would certainly have brought us to land long before now."

Tarrant said, wearily, "You've all steered, and you've all held the course, and even if the compass is off, we could not go in circles."

"But where the bloody hell *are* we? What's your log say? You're shooting the sun, you're getting some sort of latitude or longitude or whatever it is you're supposed to get, where are we?"

Tarrant turned to the fly-leaves of the atlas, on which he had kept his log. "See for yourself."

"If we knew anything about right ascension and declination and the rest, we'd be navigating."

Luden cut in, "What can you expect of home-made instruments and a Buginese manual? This is still better than staying at Pulau Besar."

"We want to know where we are."

"Twelve degrees south, one twenty-nine east." Tarrant jabbed his pencil to the map. "Right here."

"Right there, eh? But how many days, how many bloody miles?"

They were hard and angular and desperate, but they were also querulous, underneath it all, like children begging for reassurance. Their maddening reiteration, their unspoken promises of violence, of wrath which would have to destroy someone when it burst out—they at last stopped oppressing Tarrant, for these people, though hating him, blaming him, nevertheless looked to him for reassurance. He began to think of himself, sulking on the beach, finding comfort in self-justification and in the repeated recital of how his own government had ruined his plantation.

Everyone wanted comfort. Even a bungling navigator, a navigator in whom no one had any trust, was still tolerated instead of being thrown overboard: provided that he could offer encouragement, and plausibly.

"I hate to tell you this," he announced, "but we have at least five more days."

He sounded as though he believed every word, though he might as well have said seven or twelve or fifteen. But he had seen the effect of assurance, and he saw it work again. All but Luden went away, and Tarrant said to him, "Take over, while I sleep."

"Good! That will give them more courage than anything else could have done."

For the first time, Tarrant did not hear Jan Dekker, nor did the red sun dance behind his eyelids: and his cracked lips and dry mouth failed to disturb his sleep. It made no difference now what happened when, five days from now, there was no landfall. Let them do what they pleased.

At first he thought that the concussion which had awakened him was thunder, and that a rainstorm was drenching him. But the *prahu* was not breaking up on a reef.

Two rifles whacked. Sims and Pitt were blazing away at a plane which was beyond their range. Another stick of bombs hit the water, and geysers gushed high. Then he saw the fighters swooping down. Smoke poured from the bomber, masking the red rayed sun on its wing tips.

It began to spin. All ablaze, it nosed into the sea. Some of the victors had concentric red and blue and white circles on their wing tips. Others had a red circle in the center of a white star, in its turn on a blue circle. The people of the *prahu* waved ragged shirts, and shouted, gestured until they dropped. But the planes, having done their work, streaked home, and without seeing the *prahu*. Or if they saw,

they may have assumed that the waving was applause for a good job.

"They'll send help," Tarrant declared, confidently. "We're nearer than I figured. Line up for an extra ration."

The following afternoon, Pitt sighted land, and green jungle. There was an inlet whose waters were alive with grumbling and bellowing crocodiles. Parrots chattered, and flights of birds whirred from cover.

THE difficult landing was made. Some distance inland, poles with crossarms reached black against the sky. Tarrant did not need an astrolabe to tell him that he had made Australia. Cutting a telegraph wire would bring a maintenance crew, and in a hurry.

He laid his pistol on a rock, and beckoned to Sims and Pitt. "Come and get it. Lots of room now."

They chuckled, and shook their heads. "Digger, we have nothing to fight about," Pitt said. "You can't be more than a hundred miles from Cape York or Port Darwin, which is close enough for us. And we're two years behind time, getting home."

"Two years behind time?"

Sims nodded. "Same as yourself. Hated to leave a soft spot like Pulau Besar."

"Practical minded," Pitt cut in. "Never the ones to go looking for trouble." Then, to Sims, "Let's cut the bloody wire, while the skipper picks a spot to camp."

They plunged into the jungle. Luden said to Tarrant, "I think they—I think we've all met the war. And how is *your* grudge?"

Tarrant laughed. "Oh, that! I've got a brand new one. It's been growing ever since things blew up on Pulau Besar. Say, they must have some American troops in Australia, judging from those planes, yesterday."

"You wouldn't think of joining the navy," Maartens asked, as he joined the two. "See here, Tarrant, where did you learn to read a Buginese pilot manual?"

"I can't read it. And it's not Buginese, it's a Koran I picked up in Mindanao. It was just as clear to me as the working of an astrolabe."

"I thought as much," Luden said. "But how—" His gesture, including all that part of Australia, completed his question.

"Nothing to it," Tarrant answered. "With a compass, I figured it'd be simple heading south. Australia was too big to miss entirely. Now, when we head the other way, it'll be just as simple. With Japs in practically every damned island, we can find some wherever we land."

THE LONG TRAIL HOME

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of Many Stories of the North

Murder—at 52 Degrees Below Zero

IT WAS a foggy, dead-calm morning, and the thermometer on McGruder's Drug Store showed fifty-two below. Men hurried down Black Lake's Water Street with noses buried deeply into upturned coat-collars; other men, in parkas and mackinaws, grinned hardily and allowed it was just a wee bit cool.

"A weel bit cool, all right," agreed Sergeant Joe Bailey. "And for once I'm not out in it!"

What the Mounted Police sergeant meant was that he was not going to be out in it for long; that as soon as he had had half a dozen words with Wallace Bradford, he could hit back to the warmth and comfort of his detachment office again.

From down on the lake-front and a hundred yards or so off came the sudden blast of an airplane engine. The sergeant quickened his steps. A moment or so later he was on the snow-drifted ice, under the wing of a big, single-engined freight plane.

He tried to speak to Bradford, the parkaed, lean-faced man who was the

plane's pilot, but couldn't make himself understood. Bradford turned, waved to the figure of another man at the controls; and the roar suddenly died to a rhythmic whisper. "Now then—" suggested Bradford.

"Yeah," nodded the sergeant. "I was talking about Red Conlon. Are you going near his place?"

"Not on the way in," answered Bradford. "Why; anything important?"

"Kind of," admitted Sergeant Bailey. He frowned for a moment, said, "Remember flying me north last month to investigate that liquor-amongst-the-Eskimos case? I figured then that Red Conlon was mixed up in it and that he was getting his rotgut hooch flown in to him by some of the pilots out of The Pas. Now it's more than a liquor case; it's manslaughter." At Bradford's sharp lift of eyebrows, Joe Bailey went on. "A missionary west of La Hache has just sent out word. Seems like there was another spree not long ago. One of the Huskies died—strangled on the rotgut that could only have come from Red Conlon. So in all, my asking if you were going near his place *is* important. We'll want Red when we want him; and we'd like to know if he's still at Wolf River."

The pilot shrugged. "Dunno. There was some talk about him flying out with Neil Foster. But the question around town is where is Neil Foster?"

Sergeant Joe Bailey nodded. "Supposed to be overdue, isn't he?"

"According to his mac—Bim Stevens. Of course," Bradford pointed out, "Neil has no radio, so he may be laying-over somewhere. Or he may have picked up a charter job. Still, we'll keep an eye open for him, flying in and out."

"And if he does bring Red out with him, it'll suit me," agreed the sergeant. "I'll talk with Red when he arrives."

Bradford, a man sparing of words, nodded, and turned toward his ship. The cabin door opened and his mechanic swung down. Lefty Sykes was a broken-nosed cast-off from the Air Force, but despite his many shortcomings, popular legend had it that he knew more about airplane engines than the man who wrote the book. Sykes now kicked the skiis of the plane free from their anchor of frost, did the same for the tailskid, and entered the cabin to take the co-pilot's seat alongside Bradford. A moment or so later the plane was taxiing over the snow-dunes at sixty miles an hour.

Joe Bailey watched her swing, lift, roar by overhead. Noticing the white plume of exhaust as the plane disappeared into the ground-fog, he shivered within his buffalo jacket.

"Fifty-two below! If Neil's forced down, let's hope he's in some snug, warm camp."

THAT day one of the A. C. planes arrived from Cree Lake. According to the pilot, Neil Foster had neither been into that part of the country nor had any tidings been heard of him. Joe shook his head in perplexity and hunted up Bim Stevens.

But the mechanic, a tow-headed stripling with an everlasting cigarette, couldn't help at all. All he knew, so help him! was that Neil had hit out for Windy Lake five days before and should have returned at once. No; he wouldn't go charter-flying; he hadn't enough fuel for that; and anyway, the plane was due for a check. Neil had complained several times lately of some sort of wing-flutter, but had taken this particular flight because he needed the money.

Old Alex Campbell had a different slant on things. Old Alex was the head of the A. C. line and gave it its name. His ships, three shiny, sleek-lined Junkers, were the last words in air transportation and he was contemptuous of anything less. Over a cigar in his office he listened to what the sergeant had to say about Neil Foster's continued non-appearance.

"And you find it strange—strange that he's five days late?" Campbell gave a humorless chuckle. "Nothin' strange about that. What is strange is that he ever comes

back at all!" He brushed cigar-ash from his vest, went on. "Haywire kites like Neil and Brad fly oughta be condemned. Look at Brad—him and Lefty Sykes have been rebuildin' that wreck of theirs for two weeks now; and chucked together like she is, Brad flies her out today with no more of an okay than what Lefty himself likes to hang on her." Then Campbell added, "Yeah, and likely overloaded by about seventy-five percent."

That night, however, Pilot Wallace Bradford returned from his trip to Three Falls. The sergeant found him and Lefty unloading the plane by the aid of a floodlight affixed to their warehouse on shore. The load consisted of bales of fur, each bearing the "H. B. C." brand as well as the code-number of a Churchill River post.

Joe Bailey asked, "Well, what's new?"

Bradford, in the doorway of the plane, turned. He recognized Joe Bailey. "New?" he repeated. "Nothing's new; that is if you're referring to Neil Foster. Why, didn't he show up yet?"

"Neither Neil nor Red Conlon," answered the policeman.

"Funny," observed Bradford. "We called at Red's place on the way in but he wasn't around."

"What d'you mean, not around?"

"Not around anywhere." Bradford dragged a bale to the cabin doorway, lifted it to Lefty Sykes' shoulders, went on again. "His shack is padlocked, but we took a squint through the window. Some of his stuff is there, but not that bunch of white-foxes he kept out in the warehouse."

Sergeant Joe Bailey digested the news. "And his dogs?"

"They're still there. And that's another thing that's funny. They were all loose and the meat-cache was open. It looked as though, wherever Red went, he didn't want the dogs to starve."

Joe Bailey gave a puzzled grunt. "Looks more like Red don't figure to come back at all. Not to an empty meat-cache."

It now appeared that the charges against Red Conlon had been well-founded; that Red, jittery following the Huskie's death, had taken things on the lam. Moreover, the fact that he had taken his fur with him seemed to be another bit of proof that he didn't intend to return. A month before, when Bradford and the sergeant had been at Wolf River, Red had better than two hundred Barren Lands white-fox skins. His catch, he said, for half of the winter. The sergeant hadn't believed him then and doubted it more than ever now. Red wasn't much of a trapper at any time. But if Red had hooch and the Huskies had fur, well, two hundred white foxes was only a sample of what an energetic man might do.

"D'you think," suddenly asked the sergeant, "that Red flew out?"

"Must have," said Bradford. "His dogs are still there."

"And that Neil Foster was the guy who flew him?"

Bradford shrugged. "That's something I wouldn't know. And only Neil could tell you."

The sergeant said nothing further until the unloading of the plane was completed, then he asked Bradford for a frank opinion of Neil Foster's continued delay.

THE pilot was lighting a cigarette. "As a frank opinion, I haven't one. But if he *did* fly Red out, you've three bets to cover. He may have hit for The Pas, he may have hit for Edmonton, or he may have been heading in here and never made it. And by that I mean forced down."

"But wouldn't you have seen something of him on your way in today?"

"Not after we crossed the Churchill. By that time it was dusk."

The sergeant and Bradford both ate their meals at the Ritz Cafe. There, later on, they met again. Bradford was at a table, and Joe Bailey joined him. "Well," said Joe, "I've been on the phone." He explained. "Edmonton and The Pas. Neil didn't land either place."

"And Red?" asked Bradford.

"The Police don't know him."

Bradford looked sober. Joe Bailey flagged a waiter and ordered a meal. And just then Alex Campbell passed the table whereat the two men were sitting.

The policeman hailed him. At his invitation, the owner of the A. C. line said he had eaten at his hotel but that he'd sit in for a cup of coffee. The sergeant told him of the news Bradford had brought in and the later word he himself had received over the telephone.

"So with all our excuses used up," he said, "things don't look good for Neil Foster."

CAMPBELL seemed impressed. "Well, what d'you think we should do?"

"I know what I'll do," said Bradford. I'm going north to the Churchill tomorrow, and I'm keeping my eyes peeled all the way."

Campbell nodded. "We don't want to get all stampeded about what may be nothin', but at the same time we don't want to miss any bets. If I was you," he said to Joe Bailey, "I'd turn in a general alarm for all aircraft to be on the lookout; and if that didn't turn up something, I'd call in the Air Force planes. Bill Jameson is headin' north himself tomorrow; and if you think you ought to start something, go on along with Bill."

The sergeant said he would probably accept the offer; and when daylight broke the following morning, he found himself doing it. The weather had moderated somewhat and the fog had lifted. Wallace Bradford, ready for his Churchill trip, was at the base before them. His plane was ticking over under the supervision of Lefty Sykes, and he took off alone and almost at once. A few minutes later, Bill Jameson and Joe Bailey followed in the Junkers.

Jameson's destination was Sled Portage, east and short of the Churchill, but it was agreed that the A. C. plane would keep to the probable line of Neil Foster's flight from Wolf River to Black Lake, turning sharply for Sled Portage at the last.

From the air, the north country was a black-and-white checkerboard of snow, spruce and rock. Neil Foster's plane was a brilliant orange in color, one that could be spotted for miles. But although the sergeant and the pilot kept a sharp lookout, they saw nothing until they had almost reached the Churchill. Then they saw Wallace Bradford's plane swinging ahead of them in long, flat spirals.

Bradford was going down. That was very evident. From three miles away it looked as though he were picking a landing. But he wasn't. Within the next minute, the two in the Junkers knew the reason for it all. Down below where Bradford was swinging, three thousand feet below him and on top of a spruce-dotted, rocky hill, was a crumpled splash of color. Orange color; the color of Neil Foster's plane.

But it wasn't big enough for the plane itself. Not till they were over the spot did the sergeant get the rest of the picture —something that looked like a campfire, a hundred yards or so away from the color-splash.

They dropped down to five hundred feet, following Bradford in his tight, steep turns; and now the details were at once distinguishable. Thus the campfire resolved itself into something on a more gigantic scale, the charred embers of it were the blackened, heat-twisted ribs of a plane, and the orange-colored splash was an airplane wing.

From his controls, Jameson glanced at Joe Bailey. The pilot was grim-faced, tight-lipped. With his chin he indicated a bay on a fair-sized lake, two miles off. "We'll land there," he said.

Wallace Bradford seemed to have the same idea. His ship was going into a flat glide, heading for the bay. They landed almost together, and met on the ice. None of the three spoke the thoughts in his heart; the sergeant merely said, "The

snow'll be deep, but I guess we'll make it."

The scene of the crash was due east of them; and climbing upgrade from the lake, they made for the spot.

The sergeant was in the lead when they broke through the spruce and gained the hill-crest. There was the wreck, grim and shapeless, but they were more concerned with what the wreck might contain. And they were soon to know.

Neil Foster was jammed against what had once been his instrument panel. At least, they supposed it was he, for the body of Red Conlon was found broken and twisted across an outcropping of granite, a hundred yards away. Foster had fought his ship right to the last; Red Conlon apparently had been flung clear by the impact, or, in a moment of horror, had jumped.

DEATH, instantaneous death, had struck both men, but where Neil Foster's body was all but unrecognizable as such, Red Conlon's had been spared the fire. Even the ashes and cinders that the wind had carried across scarce touched him, but his body, though frozen, was smashed and bloody.

The sergeant looked into the set faces of his two companions. "We can move this one any time, but it'll take tools to free Neil Foster."

Bill Jameson looked sick. "Leave 'em both, then," he said, and turned away.

Wallace Bradford sighed. With quiet sincerity he said, "They didn't come any better than Neil Foster. We fought each other, but—well, Neil was tops." He looked quickly beyond the crest of the hill. "There's a wing over there. Did you see it? Let's take a look."

They found the wing, crumpled and ripped, torn loose from the rest of the framework.

"In the air?" asked the sergeant. "Or coming down?"

The two practical men, Bradford and Jameson, gave as an opinion that the wing had been responsible for the crash. An old break, suddenly subjected to strain, could have been the cause, or a weak spot rendered brittle by the extreme low temperatures.

"But we'd better leave it," Bradford said. "An inspector will be in to check it over. And make a lot of guesses," he added; "that don't mean a thing at all."

AT SLED PORTAGE, Pilot Bill Jameson found three white men—trader and a couple of trappers—who wished passage to Black Lake.

"Might work all right," suggested Sergeant Joe Bailey. "Mebbe the wreck has come to stay, but the bodies should be shifted. And if these guys"—with a nod to the trader and the trappers—"care to lend a hand, we could be home by midday."

The three white men, when informed of the crash and the job ahead of them, agreed; so when Pilot Jameson left again he carried with him a hacksaw, a crowbar and a pair of improvised stretchers.

Later, with the bodies loaded onto the stretchers, the policeman took another look around. Scarcely anything recognizable remained in the plane itself except a charred and empty gasoline can, a heat-twisted lantern and an axe with a burned-off handle. But at the spot where Red Conlon's body had been, he stared thoughtfully down at a shred of burned fabric and a sliver of broken glass.

He picked up the piece of glass and turned it over in his fingers. Bill Jameson, who was with him, said, "Chunk of the windshield, I guess. Flew everywhere when the tanks let go."

The sergeant nodded, abstractedly. "Uh-huh; the windshield," and dropped the fragment into the snow again.

Bill Jameson looked at him in puzzlement. Anything wrong with it?"

"Not wrong," said the policeman. "But it's something not just right."

He gave the pilot no further satisfac-

tion, but led the way over to the other men.

Shortly after noon they reached Black Lake, and one of the first to greet them was Bill Stevens. The mechanic came forward expectantly, but the question on his lips was forestalled by Joe Bailey. "Too bad, Bim," the sergeant said, "but I guess Neil's made his last hop." He indicated the Junkers. "He's inside."

Stevens started. "Mean he's—he's dead?"

"Yeah. And there's nothing left of the ship. Burned to a cinder, both it and Neil."

Stevens, a shocked expression on his face, moved toward the Junkers. Lefty Sykes, who had been standing with him, asked, "Anyone with Neil when it happened?"

"Just Red Conlon. He got it, too." The sergeant added, "Can I use your phone? We'll need the ambulance."

The phone was located in Bradford's warehouse, and while he waited for an answer to his call, Joe Bailey looked around him. The bales of Hudson's Bay fur had gone out already, but over in a corner was a pile of case-goods destined for one of the trading-posts.

He got in his call and was back on the ice again when the booming of a plane came out of the north. It was Wallace Bradford's; and within a few moments it had landed and taxied in to a rest beside the A. C. Junkers. Bradford stepped out in time to see the two bodies being loaded into the ambulance.

"So you brought them out after all?" he observed to Joe Bailey.

"We had help," agreed Joe, "so decided to use it." He indicated the three men from Sled Portage.

Bradford said that was quite all right with him. He was hitting north immediately after having a snack to eat; so even had he wanted to help, he wouldn't have had the time.

"Where to?" asked the policeman.

"Neultin Lake. Man up there, English chap, wants to come out and join the RAF," explained Bradford. "He sent word to the Churchill for the first plane in to come and get him. So that'll be me."

The sergeant rode the ambulance to the undertaker's, then went on up to the railway station. The station-agent, a fat man in shirtsleeves and a green eyeshade, was making up his way-bills. "Busy, Fred?" Joe asked him. "Then tell me, what's going out today?"

"Well," answered the agent, leisurely. "There's the H. B. fur; and a couple or three boxes of fish for Lefty Sykes' brother in Winnipeg. Lot of it, too; a hundred and eighty pounds."

"Show me," ordered Joe.

There were three boxes, three big fish-boxes; but when opened—and despite the agent's protest—they contained not fish but white-fox skins. Their weight, to equal fish, was made up by chunks of iron.

THE agent's eyes went round with wonderment. "Nail 'em up again," ordered the sergeant, "and get 'em out of the way where they won't be seen."

"Sure," agreed the agent.

"And another thing," emphasized Joe Bailey. "Keep it under the old hat."

"Oh, sure," the agent agreed again. "Every time."

After a hurried meal, Joe Bailey lugged a stampeding pack down to the air base. Wallace Bradford was making evident preparations for his trip to Neultin Lake. He frowned when the sergeant appeared.

"Think, perhaps, Brad," Joe said, "I'll take the trip with you."

"With me?" exclaimed Bradford. "To Neultin? Up in the Barrens?"

"Not all the way," Joe explained easily. "But things being as they are with Red, I'll have to check up on his stuff and bring it out. You won't be coming back today, so if you drop me off on the way up you

can pick me up again tomorrow coming home."

Bradford seemed none too enthusiastic over the idea. "Lefty's going with me. And there'll be this English chap. With a bunch of dogs, traps and so forth, you're going to be crowded."

"Never mind," said Joe. "I'm in a hurry. And being crowded never worried me at all."

THEY were dressed for the trip. Joe himself wore his hip-length buffalo jacket. Bradford had a mackinaw over a jumbo-knit sweater. Lefty Sykes wore what he always wore—a coat-style cariboo parka with green braided tie-strings instead of buttons. But in spite of the clothing, Joe Bailey gave a shiver when at four thousand feet and just south of the Churchill they passed over the wreck of Neil Foster's plane.

Having once been on the spot, the sergeant recognized details more easily. There was the ember-like skeleton of the plane itself in that gigantic camp-fire; the dark streak where the wind had smeared the snow with ashes; and the granite outcrop in the center of the streak where Red Conlon had smashed to his finish.

Haywire kites, no parachutes, four thousand feet to the ground—

But they passed the place, held on, and neared the Barrens as the sun began to drop. Little more than an hour of daylight remained, and after leaving Joe at Wolf River, Bradford would need to keep moving to reach the Englishman's camp by nightfall.

Now the Barrens were right over the nose of the plane. They stretched out, vast and limitless. Save for a bluff or so of stunted spruce, there was little to break their tremendous monotony. Hill and dunes of wind-packed snow, rivers and tundra and lakes that were all of a piece. And away off to the southwest, a brass-colored sun that was sliding down behind the desolate horizon.

Sliding down, too, was the plane, making for the mouth of Wolf River where it emptied into Wolf Lake. There was Red Conlon's cabin in a grove of timber; the loop in the snow of a single airplane ski-track; five dogs squatting outside the cabin and looking skywards. And when he finally landed and walked up the hill, Joe was surprised to find the big wolf-dogs so friendly.

As on a previous occasion, the sergeant noticed how stoutly built was the cabin. It was heavily plastered and well roofed. Furthermore, it was locked. But by prying with a length of wood, the padlock gave and the three men stepped inside.

The air within was only moderately cold, and Joe Bailey took a hasty look around. There were shelves on the wall that held a supply of canned goods and Red's dishes, but there was no clothing in sight. There was a reflector-backed kerosene lamp on one wall and a mirror and a calendar on another; and while a pole bunk in a corner was strewn thickly with hay, the blankets or other bedding was gone.

Joe Bailey looked around a bit further. Behind the door, in a spot not easy to be seen, was a rifle in a moosehide cover. A key hung on a nail over the door and would probably fit the padlock outside. And on a shelf over the cold stove lay a pair of mitts.

Joe Bailey gave a grunt, spoke to Bradford. "What d'you make of it now? D'you figure Red's coming back, or not?"

"Dunno," said Bradford. "It's got me beat." He lit a half-smoked cigarette and flicked the match toward the stove.

"What's outside?" Joe asked. "In the warehouse?'

"Nothing; except a few empty cartons and Red's sleigh. The harness, too, of course."

"Something screwy about all this," Joe said emphatically. "You were in here yesterday, and that single set of airplane ski-tracks we saw on the lake are your own.

All right. Then where are the tracks of Neil Foster's plane—the one Red went out on five days ago?"

Bradford studied the problem. "That'd mean that Red didn't board the plane here."

Joe Bailey shrugged impatiently. "Another thing—no matter how well this shack may have been built, don't she strike a bit too warm for one that's been vacant five days?" He pointed to a water-pail on a stool behind the stove. "Five days—and only a skim of ice. And why should Red go off and leave water in the pail at all? He'd know it'd freeze, know the pail would split."

Bradford looked quickly at Lefty Sykes; from him to the sergeant. "Then it adds up; Red doesn't figure on coming back."

Joe Bailey snorted. "So he chucks all this stuff away—grub, dishes, dogs, sleigh. Hooey! And unless he was clean looney, why did he pull out in a fifty-below spell and leave his mitts behind?"

BRADFORD gave a short, nervous grunt and flicked his cigarette in the general direction of the stove. Joe Bailey wasn't interested in the cigarette as a cigarette, but he was interested enough to see that it shouldn't start a fire. So he put out a foot to step on it; and when the thing rolled between two boards, he stooped to pick it up.

It lay somewhere in the shadows, but stooping for it showed Joe Bailey something else—a dirty, rusty-red spot on the floor; and hard alongside the red spot was a six-inch piece of green braid.

He picked up the butt as well as the braid. The butt went into the ash-box, the braid he turned over in his fingers. Then he suddenly realized that this that he held in his hand was the same sort of stuff that Lefty Sykes used to fasten his parka.

He glanced up, at the coat, as Lefty stood before him. There they were, tie-strings in pairs, one pair, two pair, three— Not three pairs; the last one had lost its mate.

Then his eyes met Lefty's. And Lefty's eyes, set each side of a broken nose, were wicked, questioning, calculating. Suddenly, without warning, Lefty sprang.

But Joe was ready. He had had a split-second warning; and he met the rush with a stiff-arm jolt to Lefty's jaw.

It stopped the man, but didn't knock him out. He staggered, wheeled, went back against the far wall to glower there, dazed, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

Bradford, too, made a motion; but Joe checked it at birth. Fist bunched, ready—it was all that Bradford needed. He stopped himself, eyes narrowed, breathing hard.

"So that's the way of it, eh?" snarled Joe. "And you *do* know a bit about it? Okay; then I'll tell you the rest!" His rat-skin cap was over one eye; and hard-jawed, straddle-legged and bulky in his buffalo coat, he stood and glowered at the pair. "That bit of braid came off your parka," he told Lefty Sykes. "Red Conlon probably yanked it off in the tussle you had before you brained him. And this," he said, scratching the rusty spot with a toe, "is Red Conlon's blood."

Lefty Sykes' head seemed to be clearing. He glared back at Joe Bailey, sooty-eyed. The pilot, Bradford, had gone pale, but his jaw was hard set.

"I've been a sucker quite a while," the sergeant went on. "I looked toward The Pas for the bird who was flying in Red's rotten liquor. I never thought to look right under my nose. And when that Huskie snuffed out, you knew there'd be the devil to pay. Red'd squawk if the screws were put on him, and you'd face ten or fifteen years in the pen." Joe Bailey nodded knowingly. "Your first idea was to fly him out, to get him out of the way; then when you came north yesterday and found the wreck of Neil Foster's plane, you had another idea. Fly him out nothing! Rub him out! That way Red could never talk—and you'd be eight or ten thousand dollars' worth of foxes to the good.

"So you did it; you beefed him and loaded him in your plane. And you flew low over the crash and you shoved him out. And if you'd dropped him almost anywhere but where you did, you'd probably have got away with it. Red lit right in the path of the wind, and if he'd been there before the fire, he would have been covered in ashes. I missed the point the first time, but I noticed it later, when we went to move him. There were ashes and a bit of burned fabric and even a bit of windshield glass right on the spot where Red had been lying."

Lefty Sykes began to speak, but Bradford cut him off. "I'll handle this," the pilot said sharply. Turning to Joe Bailey, he asked him, "That's your case, is it? That, and a few two-bit conclusions because you find Red's dogs here at the shack and an old pair of his mitts up on a shelf?"

"No, there's other things," Joe Bailey told him bluntly. "Stuff like Red locking the shack and forgetting to take the key along; him heading out with Neil for Black Lake when he knew I'd be looking for him; and three boxes of fish up at the Black Lake depot packed with white-fox skins and a few assorted chunks of old iron."

The words were a slap in the face for Wallace Bradford; but they had an opposite effect on Lefty Sykes. Lefty swore an oath, stuck down his head, and charged.

THE mechanic was a husky sort of man and almost as big as Joe Bailey. Moreover, he hadn't collected that broken nose following the paths of peace. The policeman jarred him with a wallop as he came but failed to stop him; and then Bradford stepped in.

There was going to be no quick finish to this fight; it would be vicious; and if Joe Bailey went down, he knew he could expect no mercy. So he would have to fight, cripple or kill or be crippled or killed himself.

He was wearing no gun, though he had his service arm in the packsack; and even if he had had it, he would have had little chance to bring it into use. It was a case of slug and swing till you could grab up a chair and use it as a club.

But then he went down; they all went down.

Salty blood was in his mouth; and as he locked his legs around Bradford's waist, something crashed against his ear. It maddened him with pain; he went wild.

But going wild wasn't the thing to have done. In a mad effort to finish off Bradford, Sykes was given his chance. He took it—used his knee and the heel of his hand, and Joe Bailey went as flat on the floor as though his legs had been kicked from under him.

He felt sick, horribly sick from the kick in the stomach; tears flooded his eyes from that vicious drive on the nose. Then in fast order came three brutal blows on the back of his head. And as the pinwheels whirled and shivered, Joe Bailey checked out.

THREE factors saved him from being murdered, one for each blow: the thick muskrat cap on his head, the lack of any suitable weapon for murder, and Lefty Sykes' haste. What actually roused him was a curious sort of crackling and the roar of an aircraft engine.

He dragged himself to a knee, and the past returned. Sure; he'd been beat up. Sykes and Bradford. And the crackling was—by golly! fire!

Swaying dizzily he got on two knees. He located the fire. It was on the bunk. The hay was burning. He guessed the rest. Lefty, after knocking him cuckoo, had dodged from the shack and chucked a match to the hay on the bunk as he went. Nice guy, Lefty—and that would be the plane pulling out—

He remembered the water-pail with its thin coating of ice. He found the pail, broke the ice, sprinkled the water over the bunk and completed the job by dumping it on it bodily. Then with smoke choking

him and his eyes streaming with tears he made over to the door.

At first he could see nothing, but when he had wiped the tears away he had a glimpse of the plane roaring toward him, a mile and a half away on Wolf Lake.

He understood. Bradford had given up all ideas of going in for his Englishman. He was taxiing into the wind, coming toward the cabin, heading for civilization—and freedom from pursuit.

Ribs, head and shoulders, Joe Bailey ached all over; but nothing moved him as did this that he saw. Bradford and Sykes, as cold-blooded a pair of killers as he had ever yet met, were making their getaway and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. In a moment or so the plane would be over him, with the two killers jeering down as they roared by. Then he remembered the gun behind the door.

He grabbed it, stripped its cover. It might not have a shell in it. He looked at it almost frenziedly. The magazine indicator read "6."

"Six shells!" he gritted. "Six of 'em. And .303s!"

The roar of the plane was now becoming louder. As Joe Bailey jumped to the doorway it thundered by. He pumped in a shell, threw up.

The ship was headed straight south. In thirty seconds she'd be out of range. Joe fired, and the crash of the shot was drowned by the noise overhead.

"Missed!" moaned Joe. "I'm too blamed wobbly!" Twice more he fired, and the wolf-dogs of Red Conlon's bayed in a frenzy of ecstasy.

The shots were misses again. Joe was almost desperate. He dropped to a knee, cuddled the stock against his cheek and steadied the barrel against the door-frame. One more quick swipe at his rheumy eyes, and Joe had his sights lined up with the belly of the dwindling ship.

One—two—three—

There they were, the last of six shells. And not one of them, Joe said, was a hit.

But he stayed on his knees as he lowered the rifle and the plane skimmed down a V in the hills behind the camp. Each moment she grew smaller, wide-winged and graceful against the reddening sky. Then suddenly Joe sprang up. From the belly of the plane came a puff of smoke.

Joe's heart began to pound. As the smoke thickened, the ship lost altitude. She was still going straight away, but she was dropping fast; very fast. Finally the V of the hills took her entirely; and all that remained was the wake she had left and the steady drone of her engine.

Then the engine suddenly died. One moment there was the reverberation of it; the next, a silence, tense and pregnant.

Joe's heart was pounding harder than ever. He stood there waiting. The silence had embraced the dogs. Then it came—a dull, heaving explosion; and a moment later, more smoke—a great black mushroom of it spreading against the sky.

JOE stood the rifle against the door and for a moment remained motionless. He visualized how things would look down there beyond the hills. He had seen something just like it only that morning. Then the spell was broken as one of Red Conlon's dogs gave a bark.

It seemed to be a signal. The five of them gave little yelps, nosed each other, wagged their tails out of the joy of being well fed and alive. It seemed, too, as though they saw Joe Bailey for the first time. They came over, rubbed against him.

Joe looked down at them, thought of the sleigh and the harness that Bradford had said was in Conlon's warehouse. Well, there was grub in the house and meat in the cache for the dogs. Joe had done years of trail-work before, and when occasion demanded he could do it again.

He grinned half-ruefully, patted a great tawny brute of a dog that threatened to push him off his feet.

"How about it, boy? Ready for it? You bet you—the long trail home."

A Midnight Marauder Started a Lot of People on the Trail of the Man from Brazil

DEATH COMES SMILING

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Author of "The Iron Road," etc.

I

CAROL didn't know what had aroused her but suddenly she was wide awake and was sitting straight up in her bed, shivering. There was hardly any light in the room. Shadows were thick against the walls and there were no sounds. No sounds at all. The room was like a vacuum of darkness and silence.

For perhaps a full minute, Carol didn't move. She was aware of a sharp tension building up in her body and she fought against it and the chilling fear that had seized her. She threw back the covers and swung her feet to the floor and then went rigid. The window across the room was closed. She had opened it before going to bed.

A startled cry rose to her throat. It wasn't a scream but it sounded terribly loud and it broke the momentary paralysis which had gripped her. She jerked to her feet. There was reality in her fear, now. There was meaning in it. She started for the door, running, and from the shrouded darkness at the foot of the bed, a figure

moved after her. Just at the door, a hand reached out, caught her and jerked her back. She tried to scream, now, but fin-

gers which were like steel talons closed on her throat and choked off all sound. She felt herself being dragged across the room and she fought back desperately, kicking, clawing, trying to twist free.

The fingers digging into her throat were like blunt, gouging knives. Pain ran down into her breast, a burning pain that sapped her of her strength to fight and of even the will to live. For what seemed like an endless time she was aware of the bulky figure of the man who was bending over her and of the rasping sound of his breath, then darkness closed in. A welcome darkness that blotted out all memory and pain.

THERE were a good many people in the room when Carol recovered consciousness. The lights were on and the girl from the apartment across the hall was holding her up in bed and was trying to get her to drink something. A fat man in a flowered bathrobe and with a bald, shiny head was talking to the young man who lived in the apartment at the end of the hall. There were several others in the room. They all seemed excited.

Carol gulped at the drink the girl was holding to her lips then tried to push the glass away. Everyone gathered around her bed and started talking. Some of them were telling her to lie down. The bald man was insisting that she finish the drink. A wide-eyed woman with stringy gray hair and a lean, hungry face, wanted to know what had happened but Carol still felt too dazed to talk.

"What's going on in here?" asked a heavy voice from the doorway.

Everyone looked around and between the press of bodies Carol could see the uni-

form of a policeman. The policeman was red faced and scowling and there was another officer behind him. They came on into the room and half a dozen voices started telling them about the screaming and the open window and the board from the window-sill to the fire-escape platform. Then quite suddenly the policemen silenced all the others and were facing the young man who lived down the hall and were asking him questions.

Carol realized, then, that it was the young man who had found her. He had been coming up the hall, he stated, when he had heard a scream and he had stopped at her door and knocked. When there wasn't any answer he had tried the knob and had found the door unlocked. He had opened it, had glimpsed a figure raising the window and had clicked on the lights. When he had seen her on the floor he had lifted her to the bed and shouted for help. After that he had hurried to the window but the man who had escaped through it wasn't in sight. The young man couldn't give a very good description of the fellow he had seen.

"I'd have gone after him instead of wastin' time pickin' up the girl," growled the bald-headed man.

The policemen both nodded but the young man merely shrugged his shoulders. He was a tall young man with sandy colored hair and blue eyes. He worked in one of the defense plants. Carol had seen his badge. She didn't know his name but they had reached the stage when they smiled and nodded if they passed one another in the hall.

"Get the names of these folks, Eddie," said one of the policemen to the other. "An' hang on to Ludlow. I'll talk to the girl."

He turned at that and came over to the bed and Carol did some awfully fast thinking. Under the covers she clenched her hands tightly together. She tried to smile at the policeman but it was a rather weak smile.

The policeman started asking his questions and Carol framed her answers. The other policeman got rid of the rest of the people with the exception of the young man who had found her and as Carol made her replies she was conscious of the young man watching her and of the slightly puzzled frown on his face.

BILL LUDLOW was pretty calm, but he wasn't as calm as he seemed. The excitement he had felt when he had heard Carol's scream and when he had opened the door of her apartment and seen her lying on the floor and had caught a glimpse of the man ducking through the window, was still churning in his blood. He wished, now, that he hadn't hesitated so long before opening the door. If he had been quicker he might have caught the man.

The policeman who was taking the names of the others and getting rid of them had asked Bill to stay in the room and while he waited, Bill listened to what Carol had to say. She was insisting that she had no notion as to whom the man had been and that she knew no one who would make such an attack on her. Bill frowned. It seemed to him that the girl's replies were awfully deliberate. He had a feeling that she was being awfully careful about what she said.

The officer who had been questioning the girl turned finally to the other policeman and told him to phone in a report. "Have 'em broadcast to the patrol cars in this district," he suggested. "Tell 'em to keep on the lookout for a prowler. No description. I want to talk to Ludlow for a minute."

Bill Ludlow reached for a cigarette. He offered one to the policeman who shook his head.

"Where do you work, Ludlow?" asked the policeman.

"At the Douglas plant," Bill answered.

"I reckon I could find out a lot about you there, couldn't I?"

Bill grinned. "Mister, you could find out

everything about me, even to what I like to eat."

"You married?"

"No."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"What were you doin' out so late?"

"I was putting in a little overtime."

"Do you know this girl?"

"To speak to. That is—"

"Lady, you sure this wasn't the man who tried to choke you?"

Carol nodded. "I'm positive the man wasn't Mr. Ludlow. The man was larger, heavier."

The policeman grunted. He looked a little disappointed. "All right, Ludlow. You can beat it."

Bill walked over to the bed. "If you'd like someone to stay with you, for the rest of the night, Miss Adams, I think that the girl across the hall—"

Carol Adams shook her head. "I'll keep the door and window locked. I'm—not afraid."

The girl's voice was low and not very steady. As she spoke she looked at the window and shuddered. Bill Ludlow wanted to offer to stay here himself or to sit up and watch but he knew that an offer like that would sound ridiculous. He grinned and said, "Good night, then," and turned to the door.

In his own room he got ready for bed and afterwards turned out the light and sat in the window and looked along the building toward the fire-escape. This was on the fifth floor, and whoever had come up here and climbed into the girl's room by means of a plank from the fire-escape landing, hadn't been any ordinary prowler. Bill was pretty sure of that. The man hadn't been a sex-maniac, either, for such men worked the parks and dark streets. There was a good deal more to this than the policemen had uncovered, Bill was pretty sure.

He had a cigarette and leaned back against the window-casing smoking it. He murmured the girl's name. Carol Adams. He liked the sound of it. And he rather liked the girl, too, and had since the first day he had seen her. A good many men, he knew, would have managed to meet her long before this but Bill didn't have the knack of pushing himself that way. He was pretty darned backwards when it came to women. He was really a little afraid of them.

A shadowy figure moving along the street caught Bill's attention. He watched the fire-escape intently. It was absurd, of course, to think that the man who had tried to kill Carol would return, but nevertheless, Bill didn't feel like going to bed. It was a long time until dawn.

II

BILL LUDLOW left the apartment house at seven o'clock the next morning.

There was a man loitering on the street corner near it, a short, heavy-set man with an ugly, wrinkled face. Two blocks away, Bill had a quick breakfast. When he returned, the man he had noticed was still waiting at the corner. He was leaning against a mailbox.

Bill took the other side of the mailbox. He said that it was a fine morning but the man only grunted. Several other people came up. A bus stopped and everyone got on it but Bill and the man who had been waiting here. When the bus pulled out the man gave Bill a sharp, searching look.

"I'm waiting for someone, too," Bill grinned.

The man scowled but made no answer.

More people came up and in ten minutes another bus stopped and took them away. This happened several times. Bill made no other attempts to talk to the man with the wrinkled face. He could see that the man was growing more and more nervous.

At eight-thirty, Carol Adams came out on the street and started for the corner.

The man with the wrinkled face saw her and looked quickly at Bill.

Bill Ludlow nodded. "Here she comes."

"I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about," growled the man. "For two cents I'd take a poke at you."

Bill reached into his pocket. "Here's a nickel."

The man looked abruptly away.

Carol stopped as soon as she saw Bill Ludlow. A flush of color came into her face but whether or not she was pleased, Bill didn't know. She was wearing a dark skirt and jacket and white silk blouse. Above the collar, purple bruises showed on her neck.

"All quiet for the rest of the night?" Bill asked.

Carol nodded. "All quiet. I want to thank you for—"

"For sitting up all night and keeping watch?" Bill interrupted.

"You didn't!"

"But I did. Look at my eyes."

"You shouldn't have, Mr. Ludlow. I said I'd lock the window."

"Maybe I like to sit up," Bill grinned.

Carol flushed again. She looked up the street in the direction from which the bus would come. There was an engagement ring on the third finger of her left hand. Bill glanced down at it and scowled. He wondered who had been lucky enough to put it there.

"Don't you—have to go to work?" Carol asked suddenly.

Bill shook his head. "Not for hours."

"You're—just going downtown?"

"That's it."

The bus pulled up at the corner. Bill helped Carol on. Others crowded in after them. The man with the wrinkled face turned and moved off down the street. Through the bus window, Bill saw him climb into a car.

There wasn't much chance to talk on the way to town. Bill and Carol had to stand up. The bus was crowded. In a few blocks it was jammed.

"I have to do this every morning," Carol mentioned. "And again on the way home. Sometimes at night I dream that I'll find a seat, but I never do."

"You might try an earlier bus."

"I'm too lazy to get up any earlier."

Bill grinned at the girl. "I like it. A crowded bus keeps people in touch with humanity."

"Too much so, young man," said a sharp voice at Bill's shoulder. "That's my foot you've been stepping on."

THERE was laughter in Carol's eyes as she looked up at Bill and somehow or other Bill didn't mind the apology he had to make to the rather imperious woman who was crowding him closer to Carol.

At one of the main downtown corners, Bill and Carol climbed off of the bus and Bill insisted on walking with Carol to her office building. "Don't get me wrong," he insisted. "This is just a follow-through on what I did last night."

Carol came to an abrupt stop and looked up at him and from the expression in her eyes, Bill knew that he had said the wrong thing. A shadow of fear had come into the girl's face. Bill glanced away. He pretended not to notice it. "What do you do all day?" Bill asked gruffly.

"I—type briefs," Carol answered slowly. "I—what did you mean by that, Mr. Ludlow? You don't think—"

"Of course not. When do you get off for lunch?"

"At twelve-thirty, but—"

"I'll be waiting," Bill nodded.

Carol frowned and bit her lips. They walked on and in the lobby of the building where she worked, Carol left him. It seemed to Bill that she was pretty cold in her dismissal.

BILL bought a paper. He glanced idly at the headlines, then folded it, put it in his pocket and stepped outside. He glanced up and down the street, half expecting to see the man with the wrinkled

face but if the man was around he wasn't in sight. The morning rush was pretty well over and the shopping crowd was just beginning to show up on the street. Bill moved on to the corner. He wondered what he was going to do with himself until noon and if it wasn't just his imagination which had made him think that the man with the wrinkled face had been waiting for Carol.

In a cigar store on the corner, Bill bought a package of cigarettes. He stepped back to the street, broke it open, lit one and glanced down toward the office building where he had left Carol. Four men were standing in front of the entrance, looking his way. One of them was the man with the wrinkled face.

Bill sucked in on his cigarette. He fought against a crazy impulse to duck around the corner and run. A moment before he had been feeling a little foolish.

Now, just as last night, a heady excitement was pounding through his veins. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two of the men start toward him. The man with the wrinkled face and another fellow, a tall, slender chap in a light gray suit, waited in front of the building.

The men heading toward him were rather tall and husky and perhaps a little older than he was. Bill felt himself getting breathless as they drew nearer. He stood quite still, took the cigarette from his lips, looked at it and then put it back again.

The two men came up on either side of him and stopped. One of them kept his hands in his pockets. He was bleary-eyed and needed a shave. His shirt collar was dirty. The other man was much neater in appearance but had the coldest gray eyes Bill had ever seen.

"Is your name Ludlow?" he asked sharply.

Bill Ludlow nodded. "That's right."

"I'm Ed Faris and this is Dave Knowles," said the gray-eyed man. "We're from the district attorney's office. The D.A. wants to see you."

Bill dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "Why?"

"Hell, brother. Don't ask me. Ask the D.A. We've got a car down the street a ways."

Bill reached for another cigarette. He was acutely aware of the way Knowles stiffened when his hand dipped into his pocket. People were passing them all the time but no one seemed to be paying any particular attention to them. In front of the building down the street the man in the gray suit and Wrinkle-face were still looking this way.

Faris laid a hand on Bill's arm. He said, "Come along, Ludlow."

Bill Ludlow didn't move. When Faris pulled on his arm he held back. A cold chill of perspiration had swept over him but with it had come a tinge of anger and a stubbornness that he didn't know he had. Faris dropped his arm. His lean face had tightened into a sharp, cold look.

"Didn't you hear me, Ludlow?" he said flatly.

Bill Ludlow nodded. He glanced over at Knowles. He had a notion that an investigator for the district attorney would have shaved and put on a clean shirt before reporting for work. He didn't think that either of these men were from the district attorney's office.

"Well!" Faris grated.

"Tell the district attorney I'll drop in and see him later on this morning," Bill heard himself saying. "Tell him I'm busy, will you?"

KNOWLES moved a little closer. He looked at Faris and Faris nodded. "You'll come along right now, Ludlow," Faris ordered. "Knowles has got a couple of guns in his pocket. He's rather nervous when he starts fooling with them."

Bill lit the cigarette he had placed in his mouth. He was positive, now, that these men weren't from the district attor-

ney's office, that if he went with them to their car he would never end up at the courthouse. He shook his head. He still wanted to run but his legs didn't seem to have any strength in them. He had an insane desire to shout for help but he couldn't get any words past the thickness in his throat. He glanced at Knowles. Perspiration was beading on Knowles' forehead and around his mouth. His eyes were wide, startled. The man was breathing heavily.

"You're a cool one, aren't you," said Faris bluntly.

Bill made no answer. He couldn't have made any answer. He wasn't cool at all. He was more frightened than he had ever been in his life.

"Steady, Dave," Faris ordered. "Let it go. We'll take care of this wise guy later."

Dave Knowles grumbled something under his breath but what it was Bill didn't know. He saw Faris reach out and take Knowles' arm and turn him away and in another moment, Knowles and Faris were heading back in the direction from which he had come.

Bill couldn't believe it. They had made their demands and had had guns to back them up, but still they were moving away. Bill sucked in a long, slow breath. He mopped a hand over his face. It came away moist with perspiration. He stared after the two men, saw them join the other two in front of Carol's building and then turn and look back at him.

There was a restaurant across the street. Bill headed that way. He went inside, sat down at a table and ordered another breakfast, not that he was hungry but because he was afraid that his knees wouldn't hold him up much longer.

The waitress who came to take his order told him that it was a fine day and asked him if he wanted sugar with his coffee. Bill said no sugar. He agreed about the day. Through the restaurant window he saw the man in the gray suit and Wrinkle-face. The man in the gray suit moved on to the door. He came inside, crossed over to Bill's table, pulled out a chair and sat down. Wrinkle-face waited outside.

THE man in the gray suit was younger than Bill had thought he would be. He had a wide pair of shoulders, a thin, tight mouth and dark eyes. His hair was brown and curly and was beginning to thin out at the part.

"I thought we'd better have a talk, Ludlow," he mentioned as he pulled up his chair. "That rough stuff those fellows tried to pull wasn't my idea."

"And what was your idea?" Bill asked bluntly.

The man shrugged. "Maybe I'd better introduce myself. I'm Jim Worthington."

The name didn't mean a thing to Bill Ludlow. He wondered if it was supposed to. The waitress brought in his order. She seemed a little surprised to find another man at the table.

"Just a cup of coffee," Worthington ordered. "No sugar."

The waitress went off again. Bill sampled his coffee. He broke off a piece of toast and started eating. He said to himself, "Steady, Bill. Steady. Play your cards like they were all aces."

"You should be glad to meet me, Ludlow," Worthington said suddenly. "It seems we have a mutual interest. Carol Adams."

Bill grunted. He reached for his coffee again.

"Perhaps she didn't mention it," Worthington went on, "but I'm the man to whom she's engaged."

Bill almost choked on the coffee. He set down the cup and stared at the man across the table. There was a tight, thin smile on Worthington's face. Almost a mocking smile.

"That so?" Bill managed.

Worthington nodded. He leaned forward. "Yes, that's so. And I'm a little old-fashioned in my ethics. I don't like to have other men bothering the girl I plan

to marry. What you did for Carol last night may have given you some romantic notions. If so, you can forget them. The city's full of nice girls. So far as I'm concerned, you can have any of the others, but get this and get it straight. Leave Carol Adams alone."

Bill reached for more toast. His hand wasn't very steady. He wanted to lean across the table and smash Worthington in the mouth. The waitress came up with Worthington's coffee. She set it in front of him and moved away.

"Have I made myself plain?" Worthington asked bluntly.

Bill made no answer. He was staring at the back of Worthington's left hand. Diagonally across it ran three deep scratches. They were just starting to scab over.

Bill couldn't lift his eyes from those marks. They were marks such as Carol's fingernails might have made as they tried to claw away the hand that was choking her. Of course there might be some other explanation for the scratches, but just the same—

Worthington turned his hand over and Bill looked up into the man's face. There was no smile on it, now. Worthington's eyes had narrowed. His whole body was tense.

"It was you last night," Bill muttered. "That's it. You—"

He didn't finish his sentence. Worthington got slowly to his feet and stood looking down at him for a moment, then turned and left the restaurant. Outside, through the window, Bill could see him talking to Wrinkle-face. He wondered suddenly if he was going to get out of here alive.

III

THE waitress came up to his table and asked him if everything was all right. She seemed worried by Worthington's quick departure.

Bill nodded. He gave her a half dollar. "Pay the check for me, will you?"

"The cashier's up front."

Bill stood up. "Sure. But I'm going the other way." He turned and headed for the kitchen door. The notion that he didn't have much time was riding him. He had seen death in that look on Worthington's face just before the man had turned away.

Two cooks and an old man washing dishes watched Bill Ludlow curiously as he angled across the kitchen toward a back door. Bill opened the door and stepped outside. Across a narrow alley he saw another door. He headed that way, opened it, walked through the stock room of a hat shop and out through the front past several clerks who eyed him with surprise. At the curb in front of the hat shop he hailed a taxi and a few minutes later was several blocks away.

He had had no trouble at all, yet in spite of that he was still shaky. He paid off the cab and in a drug store had a coke and afterward laughed at himself a little nervously. "This has got to stop, Bill," he muttered. "You'll eat yourself sick. What you need right now is a place where you can sit down and think without having to eat at the same time."

Bill found such a place in a bus terminal but his thinking was all in circles. Nothing would add up. If Worthington was really engaged to Carol Adams he couldn't understand the reason behind what had happened last night. And in any event, he couldn't see why Worthington and the other three men had been interested in him. He had had no chance at all to get a good glimpse of the man who had been in Carol's room. All he had done besides chase that man away last night had been to ride down on the bus this morning with the girl.

A constant stream of people were milling through the bus terminal. Bill got tired of sitting down. He got up and watched a bus pull out. It was headed for

Kansas City and there was a rather pretty blonde who boarded it and who seemed all alone. Recalling Worthington's advice, Bill grinned. Perhaps the smartest thing he could do would be to take a bus like this one and get out of town. That notion, however, only passed idly through his mind. He didn't seriously consider it. He had too good a job here to walk out on. Too important a job.

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Bill checked the number and then called it and a moment later heard Carol's voice on the wire.

"This is Bill Ludlow," he said quickly, and he tried to make his voice as cheerful as possible. "Remember me? I'm the man who was supposed to take you to lunch."

Carol sounded surprised. "Oh, but I didn't promise—"

"Can you get off at eleven thirty?" Bill broke in.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the wire.

Bill said, "Listen, Carol. I've got to see you. It's important. It's about something that happened after I left you. It can't wait until twelve thirty. I'm really serious about this. Can you get off at eleven thirty?"

Again there was a moment of silence but finally the girl answered. "If it's really important, I can."

Bill nodded at the phone. He said, "Fine. I can just make it. I'll drive by in a taxi. You be ready to hop right in."

"But—"

Without giving Carol a chance to finish, Bill hung up. He glanced at his watch. It was just a few minutes past eleven. There was time for a trip to the bank before his appointment with Carol.

THE taxi driver had red hair and a crooked smile. He looked like a man who knew his way around. Bill explained just what he wanted. "We'll drive past the Edison Building at exactly 11:31. If the girl I'm to pick up is out in front I'll tell you and we'll pull in to the curb and stop just long enough for her to hop in. If she's not there we'll circle the block and drive past again."

"An' how many times do we make that circle, Mister," asked the cab driver. "If your dame's like most others, 12:30 would be time enough to go after her."

Bill Ludlow grinned. "She's not like other girls."

"You ain't married her yet, have you?"

"Not yet."

The cab driver chuckled. "That explains it, then. All right, Mister. Hop in."

Bill climbed into the cab. He settled back against the leather cushions and hoped that Carol would be out in front the first time they passed the building and that they could get away without any trouble. He didn't have a doubt in the world but what Wrinkle-face or Faris or Knowles would be around, watching the place.

The cab driver circled a couple of blocks, then headed for the Edison Building. "Ready, Mister," he called back. "We're hittin' it right on the nose."

Bill straightened up and glanced at his watch. It was just 11:30. He peered ahead toward the building where he had left Carol. Parked cars blotted out his view of the entrance. From what he could see of the sidewalk, it was crowded with people. The taxi slowed down and Bill leaned forward. At first he was sure that Carol hadn't yet come down from her office, then he saw her pushing through the door and coming across the walk.

"She's here, Red," he called quickly.

"Pull in to the curb but don't park."

The taxi swung in toward the curb. Bill's eyes searched the throng of people on the sidewalk. He spotted Faris and Knowles. The two men had been leaning against the side of the building but were now pushing after Carol. Bill opened the door of the taxi. He didn't have to call Carol's name for the girl had seen him. But Faris and Knowles had seen him, too, and were closing in, swiftly. Bill had a feeling that this was going to be awfully close.

Carol didn't hesitate a minute about getting into the cab. She didn't waste any time in conversation. As the taxi stopped she took a look over her shoulder, saw the two men hurrying after her, and quickly pulled herself into the cab. Bill jerked the door shut. He had rolled down the window and as Faris caught the cab and tried to swing in beside the driver, Bill reached out and caught the man by the shoulder. He pulled him back and then shoved and Faris lost his balance and sprawled on his face in the street. Knowles almost tripped over him.

"You play rough, don't you pal," called the cab driver. "That little trick of yours may cost me plenty. I don't like lawsuits."

BILL shook his head. He looked back. Faris was up and he and Knowles were flagging down another cab.

"They're after us, Red," Bill said swiftly, "and if you think I play rough, just let them catch us."

The cab driver grunted. He stepped on the gas and started weaving in and out of the two lanes of traffic. "Where to?" he demanded. "An' the shorter the haul the better."

Bill said, "Make it the Union Station." He glanced over at Carol. The girl seemed a little pale. "Who—who are those men?" she asked thickly.

Bill looked straight at her. "Friends of Jim Worthington."

"Of Jim Wor—"

Bill nodded and was immediately sorry for what he had said. All color had drained out of the girl's face. She was staring at him with wide, startled eyes. She shook her head but there was nothing convincing in the motion.

The cab pulled up in front of the Union Station. Bill got out and while Carol was joining him, reached into his pocket. He offered the cab driver a five-dollar note. "You're all right, Red," he nodded. "And if there's any trouble about what happened at the Edison Building, I'll find out about it and take care of it."

The cab driver shook his head. "You'd better take care of yourself, Mister. That other cab ain't more than a couple blocks behind us. An' my name ain't Red."

Bill grinned at the man. He took Carol's arm and hurried her into the station and then out by the exit that led up to the bus lines. A bus was just pulling in to the curb. Bill and Carol took it back uptown.

Carol had said hardly a thing thus far and even now she was silent. Bill glanced over at her. "I didn't want it to be like this," he muttered. "I wanted to be waiting at twelve thirty, just as I told you I would. I thought we could go somewhere and eat and then walk back to your office."

Carol stared out of the car window. "What do you know about Jim Worthington?"

"Nothing."

"But you mentioned him. You said—"

"I had breakfast with him after I left you this morning," Bill said slowly. "That is, Worthington came in to the restaurant where I had gone and joined me. He introduced himself. He said that he was going to marry you and he told me to leave you alone."

"He said—that?"

BILL nodded. "There were scratches on his hand. He saw me looking at them."

Carol sucked in a sharp breath and Bill could feel her shiver. He said, "Carol, it

was him last night, wasn't it? The man in your room."

"I—don't know."

"But you think it was him."

"Not Jim Worthington. Not the real Jim Worthington."

"I don't get it, Carol."

The girl shook her head. "I've said too much already. I—"

Bill stood up. He said, "Come on, Carol. We're getting off. I promised you a lunch and you're going to have it."

Ye Olde Colonial Tea Shoppe was neither old nor very colonial but it was cool and quiet and the booths were very comfortable. Bill ordered for himself and Carol and when the food was served insisted that the girl eat, though it was very obvious that she wasn't hungry. Over their dessert he lit a cigarette, offered one to Carol and held a match for her. He had tried to be cheerful during the meal but it had been an effort. He had kept the talk away from all that had happened since last night, but there was no use in trying that any longer.

Bill studied the end of his cigarette. He said, "Tell me about him, Carol. How long have you known Jim Worthington?"

"Since we were both children. That's why—"

Carol broke off. She was frowning.

"That's why, what?" Bill insisted.

The girl shook her head. "I don't want to tell you. I don't think I should, Bill. This isn't your—your war."

"But it is, Carol," Bill Ludlow said slowly. "Maybe I don't have any stakes in it. Maybe I shouldn't be in it at all, only I am. I'm just like one of those neutral countries in Europe. I've been brought in whether I like it or not. Jim Worthington made that plenty clear and I've got to know what it's all about."

"You could get out, Bill."

"How."

"Go and see him. Tell him you—"

"Tell him I'm not interested in you, huh? Tell him I'll be good?"

"Something like that."

"Or I could leave town, but I'm not going to and if I went to see your friend Jim Worthington, I'm afraid someone would get hurt."

The girl was silent for a moment. She seemed to be studying the pattern of the table cloth. After a while she shook her head. "Bill, I don't know what to do. I'm—I think I'm afraid."

"Of Jim Worthington."

"No, not of Jim Worthington, but of the man who says he's Jim Worthington."

Bill mashed out his cigarette. "Go on, Carol."

"You're asking for it."

"I'm asking for it."

Carol Adams drew in a deep breath. "Jim Worthington and I grew up in the same block," she said slowly. "We didn't go together. Jim was almost eight years older than I but I don't think anyone knew him any better than I did. He went to college here and then went back east to Massachusetts Tech. He finished there five years ago and was offered a job in Brazil. He took it, but before he left he came home for a month and I saw quite a lot of him. When he left for Brazil we were engaged."

The girl twisted the diamond ring on her finger. There was a soft light in her eyes.

"You stayed here?" Bill asked.

"I had to. My mother wasn't very well and besides, the place to which Jim was being sent was way back in the jungle. He wouldn't have been given the job if he had been married."

Bill lit another cigarette. He said, "Then Jim came home."

"About six months ago," Carol nodded. "He was called back by the death of his father. I was of course quite excited about his return even though we had—almost stopped writing to each other. And at first I only thought he had changed a lot during the five years that he had been gone. But it wasn't that, Bill. It wasn't Jim Worthington who came back. The man

who returned looked a lot like Jim and acted like Jim, but was someone else. I'm positive of it."

"You mean that the man who returned is an impostor?"

"Yes."

Bill whistled. "I'm beginning to understand things now. Tell me this. He showed up here shortly after the death of Jim Worthington's father and probably Jim Worthington's father left quite an estate."

"He did. It ran well over a million dollars."

"And this man who claims to be Jim Worthington sold himself to the family and the town."

Carol nodded. "It wasn't so hard, Bill. The only family left was Jim's sister, Sadi. She's now only twenty. She was fifteen when Jim left. Twelve when he went back to Tech. Since she was twelve she has seen her brother only a few times. She hasn't seen him at all since she was fifteen."

"And she believes that this man is her brother?"

"Absolutely. She's crazy about him. She is just at the romantic age when everything in his background appeals to her."

"What about Jim's friends here in town?"

"They have accepted him, too. Maybe at first they thought he had changed, just as I did, but they soon forgot things like that. With me it was different. I had known Jim so long. I—oh, in a dozen ways I proved to myself that the man who had returned wasn't Jim Worthington. For instance, one night I took him to the little restaurant where Jim had taken me the night he proposed. He didn't even recognize the place though it hadn't changed a bit."

Bill leaned forward. He said, "Carol, does Jim Worthington know what you suspect? Does he—"

Carol nodded. "I told him the night before last. I told him that he wasn't Jim Worthington and he just laughed at me. He had had a little too much to drink. He told me that even if it was true I couldn't prove it. He said that Sadi knew he was her brother. He said there were hundreds who knew he was Jim Worthington. He said the work which had taken him to Brazil was finished and that the men who had worked with him there were scattered all over the country on new jobs and that the records of who they were had been destroyed in a fire. He—and then he got ugly. He told me that if I ever breathed a word of what I had said to anyone else—he would kill me. He—"

"And he did try to kill you," Bill muttered.

The girl shuddered. She said, "Bill, what am I going to do. I could go to the police but I'm afraid they wouldn't believe me. I'm afraid Jim was right. I couldn't prove a thing."

Bill reached for the check. He said, "Maybe not, Carol. But Jim's afraid of you, afraid of the story you could tell. He's even so afraid that he sent some men after me. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Not back to work and not home. We're going to drop out of sight, Carol, and give Jim something to worry about and we're going to try a few underhand punches, too."

IV

THE bungalow was in a row of new houses near the Douglas plant. Bill knocked on the door and the door was opened by a rather attractive young woman who seemed delighted to see him.

"Bobbie, this is Carol Adams," Bill introduced. "She's a rather special person, so far as I'm concerned. Take care of her for a while, will you."

The woman's eyes grew round with surprise. She looked past Bill toward Carol and then looked up at Bill again. "Well, it's about time," she declared. "But I didn't think you would ever do it, Bill. Where

in the world did you get the nerve?"

Bill Ludlow chuckled. "Bobbie's been trying to marry me off for years," he explained to Carol. "Aside from that, she's a pretty swell gal."

Carol was flushing. She stared straight at Bill Ludlow. "I'll get even with you for this, Bill," she said under her breath. "I'll—"

"Where's Pete?" Bill broke in.

"And where would he be every minute that he's home?" Bobbie asked. "Out in the garden, of course."

Bobbie Moore was a short, plump blonde. She had wide blue eyes and a vivid complexion. She drew Carol inside the house and Bill walked around to the back. Pete Moore was tying up tomato plants. He was a tall, lanky fellow a few years older than Bill. He called out, "Hi, sucker. Come over here and I'll put you to work."

Bill joined him but shook his head. "How would you like to have a couple of house guests for a few days. There's a girl—"

Pete stopped what he was doing and straightened up a little. His mouth dropped open. "Say that again," he gasped. "You don't mean—"

"She could have your extra room," Bill went on. "I'd bunk on the davenport in the front room."

Pete Moore rubbed his hands together. He said, "Sure, Bill. Sure. But what's it all about? What—"

"She's in a jam, Pete. And so am I. The best I can tell you is that she's okay. She—"

"Look here, man," Pete broke in. "If you need any help, just say the word. I can still use these two things at the ends of my arms, you know."

Bill Ludlow grinned. He had known Pete and Bobbie Moore for years, Pete longer than Bobbie. When they had finished college, he and Pete had spent a year bumming around the country. They had been in a good many tight places together and on a good many occasions, both of them had had to use their fists. He couldn't think of any other man he would rather have beside him in a pinch. If he told Pete what this was all about, Pete would jump into it with both feet. He was like that. But Pete wasn't a free agent any more. Pete had Bobbie to think about.

"Thanks, Pete," Bill nodded. "And if it comes to a brawl, you're in. For a while, however, I don't want anyone to know where I am. Not even the fellows at the plant."

Pete worked a scowl into his face. He started to say something but just then Bobbie came out of the back door with Carol. "Hey, Pete," she called. "Look what Bill brought over with him."

Carol was still looking flushed and uncomfortable but when her eyes met Bill's they flashed fire.

"They're going to stay with us," Pete nodded.

He wiped off his hands and went forward and held one out to Carol. "Bill says you're all right," he grinned. "An' I can tell that just by lookin' at you. Mom, what are we gonna have for supper?"

There was a good deal more talk there in the back yard, then Bill excused himself and walked over to the bus line and rode up-town. He had looked up the addresses of several private detective agencies and he stopped in at one and met a tall, thin faced man of about forty.

"I want some information about a fellow here in town," he said bluntly. "What will it cost me to get it and how fast can you work?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders. "That depends on how much information you want and how hard it is to get."

Bill drew fifty dollars from his pocket. "Will this much buy a pretty good report?"

"It ought to."

Bill nodded his head. "The man I want the report on is Jim Worthington. He came here about six months ago from Brazil, where he spent five years. The oc-

Kansas City and there was a rather pretty blonde who boarded it and who seemed all alone. Recalling Worthington's advice, Bill grinned. Perhaps the smartest thing he could do would be to take a bus like this one and get out of town. That notion, however, only passed idly through his mind. He didn't seriously consider it. He had too good a job here to walk out on. Too important a job.

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Bill checked the number and then called it and a moment later heard Carol's voice on the wire.

"This is Bill Ludlow," he said quickly, and he tried to make his voice as cheerful as possible. "Remember me? I'm the man who was supposed to take you to lunch."

Carol sounded surprised. "Oh, but I didn't promise—"

"Can you get off at eleven thirty?" Bill broke in.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the wire.

Bill said, "Listen, Carol. I've got to see you. It's important. It's about something that happened after I left you. It can't wait until twelve thirty. I'm really serious about this. Can you get off at eleven thirty?"

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"You ain't married her yet, have you?"

"Not yet."

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"She's here, Red," he called quickly.

to marry. What you did for Carol last night may have given you some romantic notions. If so, you can forget them. The city's full of nice girls. So far as I'm concerned, you can have any of the others, but get this and get it straight. Leave Carol Adams alone."

Bill reached for more toast. His hand wasn't very steady. He wanted to lean across the table and smash Worthington in the mouth. The waitress came up with Worthington's coffee. She set it in front of him and moved away.

"Have I made myself plain?" Worthington asked bluntly.

Bill made no answer. He was staring at the back of Worthington's left hand. Diagonally across it ran three deep scratches. They were just starting to scab over.

Bill couldn't lift his eyes from those marks. They were marks such as Carol's fingernails might have made as they tried to claw away the hand that was choking her. Of course there might be some other explanation for the scratches, but just the same—

Worthington turned his hand over and Bill looked up into the man's face. There was no smile on it, now. Worthington's eyes had narrowed. His whole body was tense.

"It was you last night," Bill muttered. "That's it. You—"

He didn't finish his sentence. Worthington got slowly to his feet and stood looking down at him for a moment, then turned and left the restaurant. Outside, through the window, Bill could see him talking to Wrinkle-face. He wondered suddenly if he was going to get out of here alive.

III

THE waitress came up to his table and asked him if everything was all right. She seemed worried by Worthington's quick departure.

Bill nodded. He gave her a half dollar. "Pay the check for me, will you?"

"The cashier's up front."

Bill stood up. "Sure. But I'm going the other way." He turned and headed for the kitchen door. The notion that he didn't have much time was riding him. He had seen death in that look on Worthington's face just before the man had turned away.

Two cooks and an old man washing dishes watched Bill Ludlow curiously as he angled across the kitchen toward a back door. Bill opened the door and stepped outside. Across a narrow alley he saw another door. He headed that way, opened it, walked through the stock room of a hat shop and out through the front past several clerks who eyed him with surprise. At the curb in front of the hat shop he hailed a taxi and a few minutes later was several blocks away.

He had had no trouble at all, yet in spite of that he was still shaky. He paid off the cab and in a drug store had a coke and afterward laughed at himself a little nervously. "This has got to stop, Bill," he muttered. "You'll eat yourself sick. What you need right now is a place where you can sit down and think without having to eat at the same time."

Bill found such a place in a bus terminal but his thinking was all in circles. Nothing would add up. If Worthington was really engaged to Carol Adams he couldn't understand the reason behind what had happened last night. And in any event, he couldn't see why Worthington and the other three men had been interested in him. He had had no chance at all to get a good glimpse of the man who had been in Carol's room. All he had done besides chase that man away last night had been to ride down on the bus this morning with the girl.

A constant stream of people were milling through the bus terminal. Bill got tired of sitting down. He got up and watched a bus pull out. It was headed for

came over to where Bill was standing and laid a hand on his arm. "You kids deserve a break. What's it all about, anyhow?"

Bill started to make some answer but he never got the words out of his mouth. A click sounded at the front door and the door was thrust suddenly open. In the entrance stood the figure of Jim Worthington and beyond him were several other men. There was a gun in Worthington's hand.

"All right, fellows," Worthington ordered. "Cover the house."

The men behind Worthington moved away, presumably to circle the house and see that no one left it. Worthington, himself, came on in. He was followed by Wrinkle-face. There was a sharp, watchful look in Worthington's eyes.

"Where is she, Ludlow?" he asked harshly. "Call her out! Now!"

BILL made no answer. He stood rigid, straining his ears for some sound from the back yard. He thought of Carol out there alone and a cold shiver ran over him.

"Did you hear me, Ludlow!" Worthington ordered. "You've got about two seconds to get her out here or tell me where she is."

Bill Ludlow moistened his lips. He had heard no sound from the back yard. There was a good chance, he knew, that Carol might have heard the men coming around the side of the house and might have been able to hide or even get away, but he couldn't be sure of that yet.

"Two seconds?" he heard himself saying. "That's not enough time, Worthington. I don't like to be rushed."

Worthington lifted his gun and pointed it straight at him. There was death in the man's eyes. Bill could see his hand tightening on the gun. He thought, "This is it, Bill. This is it!" But he didn't do a thing. He just stood there, still straining his ears to catch the sounds from outside the house.

V

WORTHINGTON lowered the gun a little. "So she's not here," he grunted. "Fred, take a look-see through the house."

Wrinkle-face nodded. He headed for the bedroom doors.

Bill glanced around at Bobbie Moore. She was rigid. She was biting her lips. Her eyes were following Wrinkle-face.

"Sorry, Bobbie," Bill said under his breath. "I didn't figure that anything like this would happen."

"Next time that you go to a detective agency," Worthington advised, "be sure you pick a straight one. The fellow you hired got suspicious. He followed you out here, then came to see me. He wanted to know how much it was worth to give your address."

"Which agency are you talking about?" Bill asked.

"So you blew off your mouth at some others, huh?"

Bill nodded. He reached for a cigarette. Worthington stiffened as his hand dipped into his pocket.

Wrinkle-face came back in from the kitchen. "No one here," he reported. "No one but the two of 'em, Jim."

"Call in Faris an' Knowles."

Wrinkle-face moved to the front door. He stepped outside.

"So there's just the two of you, huh," Worthington said slowly. "The guy who gave me this address said that the fellow who lived here worked at Douglas. I guess he's on the job, now. Ain't that ducky."

Bill shrugged his shoulders.

"I could make it look nice," Worthington continued. "I could make it look like a suicide an' murder. It would be pretty juicy when it hit the newspapers."

Bill still didn't have anything to say.

"Well, how about it, sister?" Worthington asked, glancing at Bobbie. "Do you want it like that or would you rather tell me where I can find Carol Adams."

Bobbie swallowed. "I—I don't know who you mean."

The front door opened again and Wrinkle-face came back into the room, followed by Faris and Knowles.. Faris waved a derisive hand at Bill. He called, "Hi, pal. How you feelin'?"

"Got that wire?" Worthington asked.

Wrinkle-face nodded.

"Tie 'em up."

Faris and Knowles started toward Bill Ludlow. Wrinkle-face edged toward Bobbie. Bill stood perfectly still.

"Atta boy, pal," Faris nodded. "Take it the easy way. It'll save us all trouble. Stick out your hands."

Bill stuck out his hands. He stuck them out suddenly, both of them knotted into fists and he lunged forward as his arms straightened, catching Faris squarely in the stomach. Faris grunted and doubled over. Bill came erect. He hooked a fist under the man's jaw, twisted sideways to avoid a smashing blow from Dave Knowles and then jabbed Knowles full in the mouth.

He was really as startled as the two men. He hadn't planned anything like this. It was all an accident. When he had stuck his hands out he had just lunged with them. That was all.

Over Knowles' shoulder he saw Bobbie struggling with Wrinkle-face. She was clawing at him, screaming, kicking. Wrinkle-face was backing away. Bill shouted a word of encouragement to the girl. He rocked Knowles with a stiff blow to the side of the head, staggered away under a sudden attack by Faris, tripped over a chair and went down. He was up almost immediately but he jerked his head straight into the smashing blow of Worthington's gun. Pain exploded in his head and a thousand stars danced in front of his eyes. He didn't even remember falling.

BILL LUDLOW was soaking wet when he recovered consciousness, wet from the water which had been poured over him to revive him. A throbbing pain hammered against the walls of his head. He was in a chair and he tried to get up but couldn't make it. His legs were wired to the legs of the chair and his arms were fastened to the chair arms.

"He's comin' out of it, Jim," said Wrinkle-face.

Bill lifted his head. He stared in a dazed fashion from side to side. Bobbie was lying on the davenport. She was lying perfectly still. Faris and Knowles stood near the mantel. There was blood on the front of Knowles' shirt. His nose was swollen and was still bleeding.

Wrinkle-face stepped aside and Jim Worthington moved up in front of Bill's chair. There was a tight, ugly look on Worthington's face.

"You're damned lucky to be still alive, Ludlow," Worthington said bluntly. "Maybe you'll stay lucky. Maybe not. I want to know where I can find Carol Adams."

Bill moistened his lips. He shook his head.

Worthington stepped forward. His hand shot out and slapped Bill smartly across the face. There was nothing gentle about the blow. It seemed to rip away half of Bill's cheek and it made everything in the room hazy. Someone threw more water over him and Worthington bent closer.

"Listen here, Ludlow," he said grimly. "I haven't even started. I'll cut you to pieces inch by inch if I have to but I intend to get an answer. Where is Carol Adams?"

Bill bit his lips. He felt another jarring blow on the side of his face and then another. For an instant he slipped back into the cool shadows which were crowding close around him but Wrinkle-face wouldn't let him stay there. Wrinkle-face shook him awake and Worthington started talking to him again.

There was no reality to what was happening. This was like a nightmare only there was no escape from it. Worthington's voice kept hammering at him. "Where is she, Ludlow? Where is she?"

Bill's lips framed an answer. "I'll tell you, Worthington. I'll tell you—if—if—"

Bill's voice was low, hardly above a whisper. Worthington leaned over. Bill moved his lips in an inaudible whisper and Worthington stooped still lower.

"Say it again, Ludlow," he ordered tensely.

Bill lifted his head, then ducked and threw the whole weight of his body into a desperate lunge. His head butted Worthington squarely in the face. A half muffled curse tore from Worthington's throat. His fist smashed out and rocked against Bill's jaw and the shadows that closed in around Bill this time were too deep to be disturbed by a dash of cold water.

IT WAS morning when Bill next awoke. He was lying in a bed and Carol and Bobbie and Pete Moore were standing at the side of it, staring down at him. Pete had a grin on his face but his eyes were serious.

Bobbie looked very solemn. Carol was biting her lips and twisting her hands together for Pete was answering her.

"No need of it at all, Carol," Pete was saying. "The big lug's as tough as they come. He doesn't need any doctor. He's just been sleeping."

Bill lifted a hand to the side of his face. His jaw felt raw and swollen. Someone seemed to be kicking him in the head. He couldn't get one eye completely open.

"How do you feel, fella?" Pete asked.

"Not so good," Bill grumbled. "What happened?"

Pete rubbed his hands together. "You passed out. You missed a real party."

Bill shook his head. "I don't feel like I'd missed very much."

"I told those men where Carol was after —after they left you alone and started threatening me," Bobbie explained. "That is, I gave them an address where I said they could find her. All but one of them hurried off. They thought they had plenty of time to get there and get back before Pete got off of work. But Pete was worried. He quit early. He took care of the man they left on guard."

Pete looked at one of his fists. "Yep, I took care of him, all right. But Carol had a hand in it, too. She was outside in the garden all the time. She couldn't leave for one of the men outside was standing right where he would see her if she moved. When they went away she sneaked into the house by the kitchen door. She had a skillet in her hand and was coming in from the kitchen when I came in the front way."

Bill glanced over at Carol.

"I—didn't get to use it, Bill," Carol explained. "Pete got to the man first."

"And Worthington didn't come back?"

"He may have come back, but before he got here I rounded up a crowd of men from the plant, men I knew and who were on another shift. There's half a dozen of them still around. It'll be plenty hot for Worthington's crowd if they try anything again."

Bill threw back the covers and swung his feet to the floor. He was apparently wearing a pair of Pete's pajamas. They were candy-striped. Sitting up had made him dizzy. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"You girls beat it and I'll help Bill get dressed," Pete suggested.

Carol and Bobbie left the room. "Breakfast in ten minutes," Bobbie called. "And don't keep us waiting."

Bill fingered his face. "I'll bet I look like hell," he muttered. "What's the matter with this eye, Pete."

"It got in the way of something," Pete grinned. "Crawl out of those pajamas. You'll feel better after a shower, a couple of aspirins and some breakfast."

Bill Ludlow doubted it. Every muscle in his body seemed stiff. He got to his feet and started for the bathroom.

"Maybe I shoulda called the cops last night," Pete mentioned. "But I didn't. An' while I was rounding up the fellows from the plant, the guy I had knocked out

got away. What's this all about, anyhow?"

Bill shook his head. "You'll be better off if you don't know."

"Not much, Bill," Pete said stubbornly. "You see, those guys treated Bobbie pretty rough last night. I don't stand for a thing like that. Whether you like it or not, you're gonna deal me in. That's final."

Bill ducked under the shower and let the needle spray dig at his body. He took it as hot as he could and then icy cold. He felt a good deal better as he toweled himself dry.

"Well, how about it," Pete insisted. "Make it like old times, Bill. What's the war about?"

Bill hesitated for a moment, then told Pete the story and when he finished, Pete nodded thoughtfully. "From what you've said," he decided, "it looks to me like Carol is the important person. She was engaged to Jim Worthington. If she says he's not the man he claims to be, someone might listen to her. You're just a nuisance to him, Bill. Maybe you can cause him some embarrassment, but you can't say with any degree of assurance that he's not the man he says he is."

"Maybe so."

"And that being the case, we'll just bring in a relay of fellows from the plant and make this place into a fort. We'll keep Carol here where's she's safe while you and I go out and stir up things in Worthington's back yard. We'll start on his sister. Get her over here if we can."

Bill frowned. "If we can get enough fellows from the plant that might be all right, but—"

"We'll get 'em," Pete promised. "They think a lot of you over there, you big lug. All I've got to do is to say you're in trouble an' need help and I can close down that plant quicker than any labor boss in the country. Let's go eat."

They talked the plan over with the two girls at the breakfast table. Bobbie looked worried but made no objection to it. Carol shook her head

"It'll do no good to talk to Sadi," she insisted. "Sadi thinks too much of Jim Worthington. She wouldn't believe us."

"But we can try it," Bill answered. "If we don't try that, what else is there to try."

Carol shook her head. She had no other answer.

Pete went to get his car out of the garage and to talk to the men outside. Bobbie went with him. Carol and Bill went into the front room. Through the window they could see half a dozen men in the front yard. There were others in back and even several across the street. They were apparently just standing around, talking.

CAROL laid a hand on Bill's arm. "I—I wish I could just step completely out of this, Bill," she said slowly. "I mean—this isn't your fight, or Pete's or Bobbie's. Or even those men out there. If I could get away—"

Bill shook his head. "This country didn't want a war, either, but we're in one."

"That's different."

"Not at all, Carol. The principle of helping one another is as old as the world. I'll bet those men didn't even ask Pete what the trouble was. He probably just said that he needed help, and they came over. They're a pretty tough crowd, too, if you start pushing them around. Worthington won't bother you here as long as he's got to go up against a gang like that."

Carol looked up at him. "How are you and Pete going to get away from the house? That is, you'll be followed, won't you? And when you haven't got these men—"

"We'll not be followed far. Put Pete behind the wheel of a car and there isn't a driver anywhere who can match him."

"I wish you didn't have to go."

Bill grinned. Pete had backed the car out of the garage and was calling to him. "You keep inside," he said to Carol. "We'll not be long."

VI

A FEW blocks from the house Bill spotted a car following them. He tapped Pete on the arm. "Let 'er out, chump. We've got company."

"I can forget about keeping under forty?" Pete asked.

"You'd better forget it for a while."

Pete grinned. He stepped on the gas and took the next corner on squealing tires. The chase lasted for a dozen blocks and Pete seemed disappointed when it was apparent that he had lost the car behind. He slowed down and angled across town, circled the block in which Sadi Worthington lived a couple times and then parked across the street from her house.

"The coast seems clear," he nodded. "Do we just go in and talk to her?"

Bill climbed from the car. "I go in. You wait here. We might want to leave in a hurry."

He crossed over to the house and rang the bell. There was no immediate answer. He rang it again. A car rolled down the street and parked at the far end. It looked exactly like the car which had followed them when they left Pete Moore's. No one got out of it.

Bill sucked in a long, slow breath. He was aware of a tingling excitement. The squeak of the opening door startled him.

"What was it, sir?" asked a quiet voice.

Bill jerked around to face the door. The man who stood there had the bland, impersonal look of a servant.

"I wanted to see Miss Sadi Worthington," Bill managed.

The man in the doorway shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Sadi is not at home. She left for Chicago last evening. I don't expect her back for a week."

Bill felt as though he had suddenly come up against a stone wall. He had never dreamed of anything like this. He had planned what he would do if Sadi refused to see him or refused to believe his story or go with him to talk to Carol Adams. But it had never occurred to him that she might be away.

The servant was closing the door. Bill turned away and headed down the walk. Across the street, Pete started the car. He swung in a U-turn and pulled in at the curb. Down the street, the car which had stopped, made a U-turn.

"There they are, Bill," Pete called. "We'd better travel. What was the matter?"

"She's out of town," Bill answered. "Gone to Chicago."

"I'll bet Worthington thought up the trip."

They were heading back up the street. The following car kept half a block behind them.

"Do I lose 'em again?" Pete asked.

Bill nodded. "Lose 'em and then drop me at the Commonwealth Building."

"Who do you want to see there?"

"A man who went to Brazil about a year ago and who might have seen the real Jim Worthington."

Pete stepped on the gas. He said, "Hang on, Bill. Here we go."

HUGH POLLARD'S office was on the top floor of the Commonwealth Building. It was properly dignified. The furnishings in the waiting room had a substantial look and the girl who presided over the place was attractive but at the same time, very business like. She wanted to know if Bill had an appointment and when he said he didn't she looked quite doubtful.

"And the nature of your business, Mr. Ludlow?" she asked quietly.

"It's rather personal," Bill answered. "Would you tell Mr. Pollard that I would like to see him about a Miss Carol Adams."

The girl nodded but still looked doubtful when she went into the next office. Bill glanced around the room. He thumbed through a magazine on the table and wondered how much he could tell Pollard. But a decision like that, he knew, would have

to wait until he could see and size up the man.

The door to the next office re-opened and the girl came out. She said, "This way, Mr. Ludlow."

Hugh Pollard looked about fifty. He had a wide pair of shoulders that sagged wearily. He was too heavy for his size. His face was round and puffy and his hair had thinned almost to the point of baldness. As Bill came in he stood up and put out his hand. "Any friend of Carol's is welcome here," he said cordially. "How is she, anyhow. I haven't seen her for weeks."

Bill shook the man's hand. He sat down in the chair Pollard indicated, refused a cigar and took a cigarette instead. Pollard re-lit the cigar in his mouth. He said, "Ludlow, huh. I don't think I ever heard Carol mention you, but that's all right. What's on your mind?"

"A man named Jim Worthington," Bill answered.

"Carol's fiancé?"

"Yes."

Pollard nodded. "She asked me to look him up when I went to Brazil about a year ago. I did and we had a very pleasant evening together."

Pollard had a heavy, rumbling voice. He had a trick of peaking his hands and then pulling them apart as he talked. His eyes were squinted by layers of flesh.

Bill leaned forward. "Have you seen Worthington since you got back from Brazil? I mean since you've both been here in town?"

Pollard shook his head, frowning. "Why, no. I don't think I have. It's inexcusable of me, too, not to have thanked him for his courtesies when I was in Brazil but I've been so busy during the last few months that I've had to neglect all social responsibilities."

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"Why certainly, Ludlow."

Bill got to his feet. Here was what they wanted. Just what they wanted. Here was the man who could back up Carol's story.

"Of course I'd know him, Ludlow," Pollard said again. "But I don't think I get what you're driving at. This is certainly a strange conversation."

"Not half as strange as what you're going to hear."

Pollard blinked. He looked over at the door as though a little nervous.

"Suppose I put it this way, Pollard," Bill went on. "Suppose I tell you that something happened to Jim Worthington in Brazil and that he never came home."

"But he is home."

"Not Jim Worthington. There's a man here wearing Jim Worthington's name and administering an estate worth more than a million dollars, but that man isn't Sadi Worthington's brother. He's not the man you saw in Brazil."

Pollard came half out of his chair. "Impossible!"

"Not at all."

"But his friends—his sister—hi—"

"His sister has hardly seen Jim Worthington since she was ten or eleven. He was away at school. His friends, that is, those who knew him before he went away, hadn't seen him for five years. The man who took Jim's place looks something like Jim and probably from letters sent to Jim and a lot of study, was able to take his place. Think it over Pollard. Here's a man who left town to go east to school and then who went to Brazil after only a brief vacation here. He's been away almost eight years. Couldn't a good actor who knew Jim's background get away with a role like that?"

Pollard mopped a hand over his face. He still shook his head. "I can't believe it."

"But supposing it's true?"

"Then the man ought to be exposed."

"Will you help us?"

"Did Carol send you to me?"

"No. But she told me about you."

"Where is she?"

"Carol's in safe hands right now. The night before last, the man who's posing as Jim Worthington tried to kill her. He made another attempt last night."

Pollard seemed dazed. He walked over to the window and stared down into the street.

"Carol saw through him," Bill went on. "She made the mistake of telling him so. He's afraid of her, probably afraid that she can influence Sadi. And Sadi, by the way, is out of town. In Chicago. I've a notion Jim sent her there."

Pollard took a turn around the office. He came to a sudden stop facing Bill Ludlow. "I'll want to talk to Carol," he said slowly. "If she backs up what you've said, I'm with you to the limit, but I've got to see her first. After all, I never saw you before in my life."

HE NODDED. He said, "Call her up, Pollard. I'll give you the number at which she can be reached."

Pollard reached for the phone, then shook his head. "No, I've got to see her."

"It's too risky."

"You mean Worthington knows where she is?"

"Yes."

Pollard scowled. He said, "Ludlow, we can't fight this thing out by ourselves. I've got some close friends in the police department. I'll get them to my house tonight.

"You bring Carol there. We'll go into this whole thing and figure out a way to trap the man so completely that he can't escape. From what you tell me, it's not going to be easy. He's had six months to build up his identity."

"Where do you live?" Bill asked.

Pollard told him, then added, "I'll send a police escort for you if you wish, but I'd rather Worthington didn't know what was up."

Bill Ludlow nodded. "We'll be there, Pollard. Right after dark."

VII

PETE MOORE had left his car in the driveway and during the afternoon had made his plans. "We'll have an escort, all right," he said at the supper table. "A couple dozen boys from the plant. They'll be along in their cars an' anyone who tries to follow us is gonna get side-tracked, mighty sudden. There'll be a few of 'em who will stick around here, too, until we get back."

Bobbie nodded. "And I'm going along."

"You're not," Pete said bluntly.

Bobbie reached for a plate and lifted it, threateningly. "You heard me, Pete Moore."

"And you heard me, too, Angel. You're too precious to risk."

"That's right, Bobbie, Bill agreed.

Bobbie Moore jerked to her feet. "Then I'm going to pick out the best looking man you leave here and we're going places."

She stalked from the room and Pete followed her. Bill looked over at Carol and grinned.

"You would leave me, too, if you could," Carol accused.

Bill nodded. "Probably."

"No you wouldn't. I'd have thrown that plate if I'd been Bobbie."

"And I'd have spanked you."

Carol flushed, then grew sober. "Bill, is it all going to be as easy as it sounds?"

"Not easy, maybe, but we're not in this thing alone any more. The police might not have listened to you. They'll listen to a man like Pollard."

Carol stood up and walked to the window. "I wish it were over. I probably don't have a job any more."

"Can you cook?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you're about to get an offer of a new job."

Carol shook her head. "Be serious, Bill."

"I am serious."

Carol bit her lips. She was frowning. "Bill, I'm worried."

"About what?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling I have. A feeling that everything isn't all right."

Bill crossed over and dropped an arm around Carol's shoulder. "You let me do the worrying from now on," he insisted. "We're going to finish this thing up tonight."

Pete came back into the room. "Come on," he grunted. "Let's get started."

"Where's Bobbie?" Bill asked.

"Picking out her man," Pete Moore said sourly.

He headed for the door. Bill got his hat and a coat for Carol. They joined Pete at the car. The voices of half a dozen men in the yard wished them luck and as they drove away, half a dozen cars parked along the street started up.

PETE took a roundabout way to Pollard's home and after half an hour's driving glanced over at Bill. "We're in the clear now," he muttered. "The car behind us just flashed its lights. That was the signal.

"You still worrying about Bobbie?" Bill asked.

"She didn't like to be left out."

Bill shook his head. "Bobbie did her share, all right. You should have seen her battling Wrinkle-face."

Pete only grunted. What Bill had said didn't seem to make him feel any better. He stepped on the gas and after a while slowed down. "Pollard's house ought to be right about here. I think it's that next place."

Bill checked the number on the curb, easily visible in the car lights. He nodded his head and Pete braked the car to a stop. They climbed out and started up the walk. Carol hung on to Bill's arm. She hadn't had much to say during the drive and was still silent.

A dim porch light illuminated the bell. Bill rang it. He didn't know what it was that bothered him but he was aware of a faint uneasiness until he saw the door open and recognized Hugh Pollard.

"You're as good as your word, Ludlow," Pollard nodded. "Come on in. And, Carol, you're looking as wonderful as usual."

He reached out both hands to the girl and led her into the hall. Bill and Pete Moore followed them. Bill introduced Pete.

"The men I've sent for haven't yet arrived," Pollard mentioned. "Suppose we have a drink in the library while we wait for them. Carol, if you want to freshen up there's a room right over here."

CAROL shook her head but Pollard apparently didn't notice. "Mrs. Pollard wants to see you anyhow," he mentioned. And then lifting his voice, "Oh, Alice! Here's Carol Adams."

"I'll not be long, Bill," Carol promised.

She stepped through the doorway Pollard had indicated and Pollard turned with Bill and Pete toward the library.

"Those men from Headquarters are due now," Pollard mentioned as he poured out three drinks. "They're good men, too. I've already given them a hint as to what's up."

Bill took the drink that Pollard handed him. He stared at it reflectively, then set it aside. He wanted a drink pretty badly but he had a notion that he might need a clear head before the evening was over. Pete, who never drank, sat holding his glass in his hand.

Pollard leaned back in a chair and crossed one leg over another. "I failed to ask you just where you came into this thing, Ludlow," he said slowly. "How about it?"

Bill shrugged his shoulders. "I came in by accident, I guess."

"Does Mr. Moore know all about it?"

"We've been staying at Pete Moore's house."

Pete grinned. "Yeah, it's been a regular fort."

"Any trouble getting away?"

"None at all. We had help."

"Maybe you should have brought some of that help with you," Pollard said slowly. "We might have been able to use it."

Bill frowned. He happened to glance at the glass in Pollard's hand. Pollard hadn't touched his drink. "That's funny," Bill said aloud.

"What's funny?" Pollard asked.

"Three men, three drinks, and none of us have touched them. Of course I don't drink much myself."

"Nor I," Pollard shrugged.

Pete chuckled. He set his glass aside. "I don't drink at all."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence in the room. Bill stared around at the door. He wondered what was keeping Carol.

"About this Worthington man," Pete asked. "What's the real Worthington like, Mr. Pollard?"

Pollard crossed one leg over the other. "About like the chap who has taken his place, I should judge. Tall, young, well tanned, good looking."

The scowl on Bill's face deepened. Pollard was talking as though he had seen both men, yet this afternoon he had said he hadn't seen Jim Worthington since his trip to Brazil.

"Do you reckon the fellow who's taking Worthington's place just happened to see the real Worthington and built the whole thing up from there?" Pete asked. "I suppose he could have seen how much alike they were and heard about Worthington's money. That must have been it, I guess."

Pollard nodded his head. "That must have been it."

A sudden warning shot across Bill's mind. There, in that simple question Pete had asked, lay something awfully important. There was a chance, of course, that the man who was taking Worthington's place had just happened on the real Worthington and had seen an opportunity to get rid of him and take over his identity. But it was much more likely that the whole thing had been planned. A clever deception like this didn't just happen. The discovery of a double for Worthington might have instigated things, but a lot of work had been done to furnish the impostor with Worthington's background.

"How did Jim Worthington's father die?" Bill asked abruptly.

"Why, he was killed in a motor accident, I believe," Pollard replied. "That is—"

POLLARD broke off what he was saying. He looked narrowly at Bill Ludlow. Bill shrugged his shoulders and glanced idly around the room. He didn't show it, but every muscle in his body was tense. There was something wrong here. He got to his feet and started for the door.

"Where are you going, Ludlow?" Pollard called.

Bill stopped and looked back. "I was going to call Carol. I wanted—"

Hugh Pollard shook his head. He lifted his hand. There was a gun in it. A black, ugly gun with a very short barrel.

"Come on back, Ludlow," Pollard ordered, his voice sharp and grating. "You're going to wait right here."

Pete Moore had come to his feet and was staring at Pollard with wide, startled eyes. He reached for his drink and took a step forward.

"That's far enough, Moore," Pollard barked.

He swung the gun from side to side, menacing each of them.

Bill moistened his lips. "So that's it," he said slowly. "Where's Carol?"

"Not here, Ludlow," Pollard said flatly. "It wasn't my wife who was waiting to see her. It was a couple of friends of mine. They'll be back shortly."

Bill Ludlow sucked in a long, haggard breath. He recalled, now, that Carol had

felt this before they had come here. Some intuition had warned her. But like a fool, he had laughed at what she had said, and now Carol was lost to him forever. She was in the hands of Jim Worthington. She might already be dead.

"Mighty clever, Pollard," Bill said slowly. "But I should have seen through it from the beginning. It wasn't at all natural that you shouldn't look up Bill Worthington after you both got back from Brazil. If he had entertained you there you would at least have returned the courtesy, no matter how busy you were."

Pollard merely shrugged. Bill mopped a hand over his face. He saw that Pete Moore had edged a step closer.

"This is how it was, isn't it," he went on. "Carol asked you to see Worthington when you went to Brazil. You did, and you saw, too, how closely he resembled someone you knew. The whole scheme of deception occurred to you then. You had the man who could take Jim's place. You were in a position down there to get what background of Brazil your man needed and up here you could get the rest of the information necessary. You could even help introduce your impostor to the town. To push things along, you arranged the accident which killed Jim's father. What happened to Jim? Did you kill him, too? I suppose you did."

"A nice case, Ludlow," Pollard said flatly. "It's too bad you're not arguing it in court."

Pete Moore had edged still closer but he was still half a dozen steps away from the man. Bill Ludlow shrugged. "At least tell me this, Pollard. Where have you taken Carol?"

Pollard shook his head. "It wouldn't interest you. Sit down, Ludlow. In that chair over there. I'm sorry things worked out like this. If you had taken that drink—"

"It was drugged, wasn't it?"

"Slightly. Take that chair."

Bill stood where he was, scowling. The chair Pollard had indicated was half across the room. If he sat down over there it meant that Pollard could easily keep him and Pete covered until the men he had sent off with Carol, returned. He shook his head.

Pollard stiffened. The grip on his gun tightened and his face twisted into a harsh, ugly expression.

"Take that chair!" he ordered again. "Take—"

There had been no sound from the doorway behind Bill Ludlow yet suddenly Hugh Pollard was looking that way, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Can I come in, please?" asked the voice of Bobbie Moore.

Pete's arm swung down and up and the liquid in the glass he was holding shot straight into Pollard's face. "Now, Bill!" Pete screamed.

He launched himself forward, right at the man. Pollard had jerked back. With one hand he was pawing at his face. He twisted his gun toward Pete and Bill heard the roar of the shot. He was diving forward himself and he hit Pollard at the same time as Pete Moore. Together, they carried the man to the floor. Bill twisted the gun from Pollard's grasp. He rolled over and got up and looked around at Pete.

"Are you hurt, Pete?" he asked breathlessly. "Did he get you?"

Pete shook his head. He was staring at Bobbie who still stood in the doorway. "Where in the hell did you come from?" he gasped. "Where—"

Bobbie moved on into the room. She looked down at her husband, then at Bill and finally at the figure of Hugh Pollard. "So you're picking on an old man, are you, Pete? I'm ashamed of you. I—" Her chin started to quiver.

Bill pulled Hugh Pollard to his feet. He shoved him into a chair and wasn't very gentle about it. "All right, Pollard," he grated. "Where is she? Start talking and start in a hurry."

There wasn't any fight left in Hugh Pollard. He shrank back in the chair and covered his face with his hands. He started blubbering but he didn't tell Bill what Bill wanted most to know. Jim Worthington and two others, he insisted, had taken Carol away. Where they had taken her, he didn't know. How soon they would come back he didn't know either.

The sudden ringing of the telephone broke in on Bill's questioning. He stared over at it, scowling. The telephone rang again.

"Watch this guy, Pete," Bill ordered.

He crossed to the desk, lifted the receiver to his ear and gave a cautious "Hello."

"That you, Ludlow?" asked the voice of Jim Worthington.

"Of course not," Bill growled, trying his best to imitate Pollard's gruff voice.

Worthington's laugh sounded over the wire. "It's no go, Ludlow. Pollard always answers with his name. Besides, I knew something was wrong when you didn't call me long ago. You didn't fall for the drink, did you?"

Bill moistened his lips. "No, I didn't."

"Is he still alive and kicking?" Worthington asked. "Pollard, I mean."

"He's alive an' talking," Bill answered grimly.

"You know, you could do me a favor by killing him," Worthington suggested. "Pollard's cut has been way too heavy."

"He's going to talk to the police, Worthington," Bill snapped. "That is, he's going to talk to the police unless you get Carol back here."

Again Worthington's laugh grated in Bill's ears. "Oh, no, Ludlow," the man answered. "You've got the wrong slant on things. I'm the man who's doing the dictating. You see, if Pollard talks to the police, you'll never see Carol Adams again. And you wouldn't like that, would you?"

Bill's grip tightened on the phone. "Where is she?"

"Right here. I'll let you talk to her in a minute, only first I want you to hear my terms. They are these. Get out of town by morning. Go to the Sherman Hotel in Chicago and wire me from there. If you're a good boy and stay put, I'll deliver Carol to you at the Sherman in a week. I don't care what you do with Pollard. Kill him or leave that for me. How about it?"

Bill mopped a hand over his face. Worthington didn't mean that, he knew. The man would never let Carol go. She would always be a source of danger to him.

He could take Pollard to the police as he had threatened and in doing so could wreck all of Worthington's plans, but there was one trick the man wouldn't miss. He would never let Carol live to testify against him.

"Well?" Worthington asked.

"What assurance do I have that you'll keep your word?"

"You can telephone Carol long distance every night, here at my home. As for the rest, you'll have to take my word."

Bill said. "Let me talk to her, now."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the wire, then Carol's voice reached him. She wasn't allowed to say much more than hello. Worthington cut in immediately afterward.

"How about it, Ludlow?" he asked again.

Bill's voice sounded broken. He said, "All right, Worthington. You win. I'll take the midnight train for Chicago."

VIII

PETE and Bobbie were both staring at him as though they couldn't believe what they had heard. Bill put down the receiver. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

"Chicago!" Pete gasped. "Why would you go to Chicago?"

Bill repeated Worthington's terms. "He's got her," he said slowly. "Maybe he won't keep his word but I've got to

take a chance on that. There's nothing else I can do."

"We can get the gang an' go pay him a visit," Pete declared.

"Bust in?" Bill shook his head. "We'd never get Carol that way."

"You'll never get her by going to Chicago, either."

"I've got to take the chance," Bill said flatly. He started for the door."

"Hey, what about Pollard?" Pete called.

"Forget him."

"Just let him go!"

"Why not?"

Pete looked disgusted. "And I thought you had guts."

Bill made no answer. He stepped out into the hall and headed for the door. Pete swore under his breath, then took Bobbie's arm and followed. Pollard stared after him as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

Outside, Bill climbed into the car. Bobbie climbed in next to him and Pete walked around and slid under the wheel. He said, "How did you get here, Bobbie?"

"By taxi," Bobbie answered. "And I wish I hadn't come. Pete, drive to the nearest police station."

Pete started the car and angled toward a boulevard. Bill looked around. A car had started up after them. It turned onto the boulevard at the same corner. It kept about a block behind.

Bill touched Pete on the arm. "We're being followed again. Do you think you could lose the car behind us without making it seem intentional."

"Why even try?" Pete asked flatly. "The game's finished."

"Not yet, Pete," Bill answered. "Lose that car, only do it by accident."

"You mean we're going after Worthington!"

"No. He's coming after us."

"But I don't—"

"Lose the car, Bill, and then head for South Union Avenue. We'll pick up three or four suitcases and some second-hand clothing to fill them. After that you can take me and Bobbie to the Hotel President."

"I don't get it, Bill."

"When we get to the President, Bobbie will register as Mrs. James Worthington. I'll register as Mr. Samuel Rosenfeld of Chicago."

"Who's Mr. Samuel Rosenfeld."

"I am."

"But—"

"It's like this, Pete. The other afternoon I telephoned Worthington's house and left a message for him in that name. I said that I was talking from Chicago and that I was on my way here with his wife and that I intended to see that he did right by her. I hinted that the settlement he had made in Brazil hadn't been fair."

"But he doesn't have a wife."

"He's not Jim Worthington, either, and how can he be sure that the real Jim Worthington didn't marry someone down in Brazil, someone who could point him out as an impostor?"

Pete whistled. He gripped the wheel tighter and a slow grin broke over his face. He said, "Hell, Bill. I should have known you wouldn't walk out on a thing like this. What you said back there at Pollard's was just for Pollard to hear."

Bill nodded. "It's a long chance I'm taking, but there's no other course open to us. Bobbie will telephone Jim and beg to see him. She will say that she doesn't want to cause him any trouble, that she still loves him. And ten to one, Jim Worthington will come down to the hotel to take care of her. He'll be as frightened of her as he was of Carol Adams."

"We'll be waiting for him, huh."

"I'll be waiting for him. After Bobbie has registered and made the telephone call you and she are out of it."

Pete grunted. He said, "That's what you think, Bill. Now, don't bother me. I've got some careful drivin' to do."

The trap was set. From the room Bobbie had taken in the Hotel President,

she put in a call to Jim Worthington while Pete and Bill hovered near her. How well Bobbie could play the part, Bill hadn't known, but after the first moments of her conversation over the phone he knew that he didn't have to worry about that.

"Jim," Bobbie cried when she heard Worthington's voice on the other end of the wire. "Oh, Jim, is it really you?"

She sounded as excited as a school girl, Bill decided. He glanced at Pete who was grinning.

"Jim, this is Ellen," Bobbie rattled on. "I know that I shouldn't be calling you. Mr. Rosenfeld said that I shouldn't. He said that I should go right to bed. That I shouldn't get in touch with you at all, but I just couldn't go to bed, Jim, without talking to you. Was it wrong for me to come up here? Should I have stayed in Brazil, Jim? I know I promised to, but——"

"Where are you, Ellen?" Worthington broke in.

"At the Hotel President. It's a perfectly horrible place. I don't like it here at all. I——"

"Take a taxi and come on out here," Worthington suggested.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Jim," Bobbie cried. "I'm all ready for bed. Besides I promised Mr. Rosenfeld—"

"To hell with Rosenfeld."

"Why, Jim. He's been awfully nice to me. Much nicer than you have been."

"Look here, Ellen. I want to see you."

Bobbie's voice was sweet as honey. "Oh, Jim. Do you really? Then you're not mad at me for coming up here?"

"Of course not, dear. Why not come out here? Rosenfeld will never know. We can talk things over."

Bobbie shook her head at the phone. "But I'm ready for bed, Jim."

"What's your room number?"

"It's 826. Jim, are you—"

"Maybe."

Bobbie winked at Pete. She brought the phone close to her lips. "Jim, I love you," she whispered. "I still do. Really."

There was a moment of tense silence in the room after Bobbie had turned away from the phone. Pete rubbed his hands together. "It worked, by golly! It worked."

Bill nodded his head. "Yeah—maybe."

"He'll come, Bill."

"Of course he'll come," Bobbie declared.

Bill reached for a cigarette. His fingers weren't very steady as he lit it. They were banking an awful lot on what would happen during the next hour.

The ringing of the telephone startled him. Bobbie answered it, listened for a minute and then hung up. Her face was sober with disappointment as she looked at Bill.

"That was him," she said slowly. "He's —not coming, Bill. He says he can't. He says he'll see me in the morning."

Pete half-smothered a curse. He said, "Bill, we can still collect a bunch of the boys and go after him. We can—"

Bill shook his head. He was aware of a sudden excitement. That promise of Worthington's to come down here had been gained too easily. This was more like it. "We're staying here," he breathed. "Don't you remember what happened to Carol to start all this?"

"You mean—"

"I mean Worthington's back in the old groove. He slipped into Carol's room and tried to choke her. He'll try it here, on the woman he thinks is Jim Worthington's wife. Her death could be blamed on a prowler. It would look as if she woke up and discovered someone in her room. Worthington will have his alibi. That phone call he just made is to cinch it."

Pete whistled. "What do we do?"

"You get to bed, Bobbie," Bill ordered. "Turn out the lights. Pete, wait in the bathroom. I'll stand by the door. No talking."

An hour passed and then another. Bill leaned back in a chair on the

blind side of the door. Bobbie had fallen asleep. For an hour, now, he had heard her regular breathing. There was no sound from the bathroom. Pete might be sleeping, too, Bill realized. He had taken a pillow with him and sprawled out on the floor.

Over and over, during the time he had waited, Bill had checked the conclusions which had led him to believe that Worthington would come here tonight. Logically, the reasons were still sound, but as the minutes passed they didn't stand up so well.

Except for the regular sound of Bobbie's breathing, there was hardly a sound in the room. Traffic noises reached faintly in through the almost closed window. Bill stretched and shifted a little in his chair. He heard the sound of footsteps in the carpeted hall beyond the door and for a moment went rigid. The footsteps passed, then came back and stopped. A hand tried the knob.

BILL LUDLOW came silently to his feet. He moved back against the wall. As clearly as though he could see into the hall, he knew who was there. As though it was already over, he knew what would happen. With a pass-key Worthington would unlock the door. He would come in, cross to the window and close it and then move to the bed. He would stoop over the figure lying there.

A key sounded in the lock, turned the bolt and was removed. The door started slowly to open. A dim shaft of light stretched in from the hallway, a shaft of light almost blotted out by a man's figure. The man stepped into the room and closed the door.

Bill pressed his body back against the wall. He could hear the faint sound of the man's breathing. For what seemed like an endless minute, the intruder didn't move. Bill could make out the white blur of his face as his head turned from side to side. The man's eyes were searching the room, probing the darkness. And suddenly he started for the bed.

"Hey, Bill!" whispered a voice from the bathroom. "Is that you?"

The man was half across the room when Pete's question hit him. He stopped and jerked erect, whirled around and dived for the door. Bill Ludlow charged in to meet him. He heard a muttered curse as the man checked himself. He saw an arm flung up in the air and caught a glimpse of the club the stranger was holding. It crashed down on him as he came against the man, scraped against the side of his head and took him in the shoulder. It seemed to paralyze one whole side of his body, but the force of Bill's charge carried both of them backward to the floor.

The man was quick and strong. He rolled away as he fell, came to his knees and smashed another blow with his club. Bill took it in the side. He sprawled over the man, got his fingers around the man's throat and fastened them there with all the strength at his command. In a dim fashion he was aware of Bobbie's voice, screaming for Pete. The lights clicked suddenly on and in another moment Pete had left the switch for which he had been fumbling and was helping him.

"Ease up, Bill," Pete ordered. "We don't want this guy dead."

The door to the room had been opened and a couple of men were looking in, men in old-fashioned nightgowns over which they had thrown coats. Bill took his fingers away from Worthington's throat. He stood up and looked over to the door. "Come on in," he invited grimly. "We're about to need some witnesses."

Worthington's face was purple. He was having trouble breathing. The two men who had been at the door came on into the room and several more joined them. Pete picked up the club Worthington had been carrying. It was a short, heavy piece of wood, as thick at the end as a man's upper arm.

"He was gonna use this on Bobbie,"

Pete breathed. "I think I'll try it on him."

"Unless he talks," Bill said grimly.

"Yeah, unless he talks."

Pete sounded as if he meant it and Bill's eyes were as cold as ice. The other men in the room were watching in wide-eyed curiosity.

"You've got a pass-key to this room, Worthington, and were caught here," Bill said slowly. "We have plenty of witnesses to the phone call which brought you here. Pollard will crack under pressure and you know it. Carol is being held prisoner at your house. The police are on their way. The whole story's coming out. I reckon you might as well make it easy on yourself."

Several policemen, hurriedly summoned by the hotel clerk after a phone call from the next room, appeared abruptly in the doorway.

"You watch Worthington, Pete," Bill suggested. "Let me talk to the officers."

He started in at once with his story and wasn't at all surprised that the police were skeptical. But it would be investigated, he knew. Carol would be found at Worthington's home. Worthington was here. These two facts in themselves were enough to raise a real doubt as to Worthington's identity.

There was Worthington's sister to be brought back from Chicago and wires could be sent to Brazil. Perhaps there were pictures of the real Jim Worthington somewhere down there.

Bill had all these angles in mind as he told his story. He mentioned most of them and then listened to Worthington's denials.

"Well, we can take you all down to the station, anyhow," decided a bewildered policeman.

Jim Worthington moistened his lips. "I want an attorney."

The policeman who seemed to be in charge looked at him suspiciously, as though that one demand alone settled things. "Sure," he agreed.

THE crowd that gathered at Pete Moore's the next evening was like a mass-meeting of delegates from the Douglas plant. Everyone who had had a part in guarding Pete Moore's home, and who wasn't on shift, was there.

"Why didn't you let us know what it was all about?" one of the men asked Carol. "We could have taken care of that Worthington guy in about fifteen minutes. What are they going to do to him, anyhow?"

Carol shook her head. "I don't know. It was really a man named Pollard who planned it."

"But Worthington killed that guy whose place he took, didn't he?"

"He says Pollard did."

"And Worthington's sister. According to the papers, she was getting wise to him."

"She wasn't, really. But if I had made an issue of it, maybe she would have doubted him a little. At least, Mr. Worthington didn't want to take the chance. He was trying to liquidate the estate and an accusation like I could have made would have bothered him a good deal."

There was quite a crowd around Carol and one of the men who had just come up asked, "Say, what's this I hear about you and Bill?"

A flush of color came into Carol's face. She saw Bobbie in the door of the house and fled that way.

"You're sleeping here tonight," Bobbie told her.

"Sleeping here," Carol repeated. "Who decided that?"

"Bill Ludlow."

"Bill Ludlow! Where is he? Where—"

"I'm back here," Bill called from the kitchen. "I thought you said you could cook. Well, you've gotta show me."

Bill's voice was quite loud. The men near the door laughed. Carol bit her lips, then joined in. She hurried toward the kitchen. She was really feeling pretty good.

A Very Hush-hush Job for Army Intelligence, with Vital Bases at Stake

BRAZIL IS IN THE WAR, TOO

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

EXCEPT that it was an Army Intelligence job, Tom Herron had not the faintest notion of his present business. He did not even have an inkling whither he was bound, until he went aboard a Ferry Command bomber at Miami and was sent into the navigator's cabin. There he found his chief, General Blaney Smith, awaiting him.

"I'm en route to Africa, you're bound for Brazil, Captain Herron," said the general. "So make yourself comfortable, and if you get airsick, God help you, for I can't!"

The general was a hard-bitten old lad who ran G-2 efficiently. Herron had been a natural for the Intelligence. Before the war he had traveled extensively in South America for a big machinery outfit; he spoke Spanish and Portuguese fluently, and had come close to marrying more than one dark-eyed senorita. He was still free, however; and not even the war had taken the roguish, cheery twinkle from his darkly aquiline features.

Once in the air, the two men settled down side by side.

"This is a very hush-hush job," observed the general. "You're chosen because you

know Brazil like a book, among other reasons. You're going to Sao Minaes, on the tip of the east coast budge, where we hop off for Dakar and Africa."

"My old stamping grounds, eh?" said Herron. "Where the big air bases are."

"Yes; both our own and Brazilian. As you know, those bases are important as hell, both for the Army and Ferrying commands, and for the Freight Transport people. Brazil is with us in the war, but just the same there's a tremendous Nazi sentiment, and the country is riddled with Nazi agents."

He went on to enlarge on this unpleasant fact. One General Pereira, tops among Brazilian engineers, was Herron's present objective; the American was to pose in his old role of machinery salesman for postwar deliveries.

"This Sao Minaes situation is a headache, Herron. This Pereira is an old-school martinet, trained in Prussia in the old days. He may be pro-Nazi; he may not. No one can find out just how he stands. He has no more human sympathy than a stone, apparently, and is a devil for duty and honor and so forth."

"Never heard of him. Why is he important?"

"Because he's installing a big system of coast and ack-ack defense outside the airdromes and city. We've been given supposedly full information by the Brazilian government; but there are rumors of secret installations we don't know about. You can see what it would mean if some Nazi coup were suddenly pulled there by Fifth Columnists—if those airfields so vital to us were suddenly sabotaged or destroyed. Nothing is impossible in this man's war."

"And Pereira is a suspect?"

"No and yes. We must learn whether or not he's with us. He's an enigma. A man of forty-odd, he recently married a very attractive woman there. We've heard rumors about her, too. On the face of things, Pereira is suspect; we must know definitely. Any mistake would have most appalling results. Your job is to get under his skin and learn what's what. Those who know him say he's absolutely reliable. Your report must be as definite as possible on this conflicting case. Dispel the mystery and report to Washington."

"Okay," said Tom Herron, and this was all the information he could get on the matter.

It was an early morning when the bomber swam down the sky and landed at the Sao Minaes Ferry Command field. To Herron, the changes here were a revelation.

The city had swollen to twice its size, pushing back the coffee and tobacco plantations; the little port had developed into a tremendous dock area; above all, the airfields and hangars and sheds made up an amazing view from the air. He began to understand the worry about Pereira. Planes were everywhere, in air or on the ground. A most vital base indeed, to the whole war activity.

A handshake with the general, and he was off, putting his kit-bag into an ancient taxi and heading into the old city, once so small, now so huge. He alighted at the small but excellent Hotel de Paris, a French establishment. The desk-clerk greeted him with a cry of joy.

"Ah! Senhor Herron! What a happy surprise! You did not wire for a room?"

"No, and I suppose you're full up?"

"By a lucky chance, Senhor, we can give you your old courtyard room, gladly! Shall you be with us long?"

"Only heaven knows," said Herron laughing. "I hope so, anyhow."

A bath, a shave, a change, and he sallied forth to get an outfit of whites and have a look at the town. The old sleepiness was gone. Brisk Brazilian air cadets were everywhere, and soldiers; the dark brown of the American Air Force was on every hand. Herron rejoiced that he was not in uniform, for salutes were legion—elaborate figure fours, regular arm-break-

ers, so many were the higher officers in sight.

FOR the rest of the day he loafed about town, got established at his old club, met a few former friends, and spread the word that he was once more in the machinery business. It took a bit of time for one to get into the proper Sao Minaes frame of mind. Yet all the while, had he but known it, destiny was waiting close at hand.

The hotel had a magnificent *patio,* sweet with orange trees, heavy with great banana leaves, cool with fountains; also a courtyard used by vehicles. Next morning, after breakfast, Herron was at the desk arranging for laundry, when one of the sleek bell boys approached him with a discreet murmur.

"Senhor, a lady in the *patio* desires to speak with you."

Surprised, Herron stepped into the flowering *patio.* He saw no one, until he neared the fountain. She was sitting there on the cushioned tiled bench, and rose, her hands extended, a smile upon her lips.

"I saw you, Tomas, and had to speak with you," she said quietly.

He bowed over her hand, met her eyes, and read the kindness in them.

"What luck!" he exclaimed, smiling. "I only arrived yesterday — and today I find you! Two years since we parted, Sonia. Then you were the most beautiful woman in Brazil; and now your beauty has come to new perfection!"

This was a lie. Tom Herron always voiced what a woman would most love to hear. There was no woman in the world he wanted less to meet, just now, than Sonia Leontoff. Not because of their old love affair, which had been a joyous interlude, but because of what she was and had been. She was no company for a G-2 agent.

One of the many refugees from Baltic lands who had flooded into South America, Sonia had quite frankly been, in those first days, a German agent. She was slender, pale, perfectly poised; not in the least beautiful, but charmingly exquisite in every detail. As he dropped on the bench beside her, Herron was throbbingly alive to danger; he felt it envelop him like a misty cloak.

"Time has been good to you," she said. "The same springing life in your eyes, Tomas, and only a touch of gray at the temples! It becomes you."

"And you seem both younger and happier," he replied. She showed a golden circlet on her finger, smiling slightly as she met his eyes.

"You see? I have found my place. No longer Sonia Leontoff, but now Senhora Pereira. My husband is a general. I should like you to meet him, Tomas."

The devil! Herron swallowed hard, but gave no sign of his startled alarm. Pereira!

"Did you marry for love—or duty?" he asked. At the significant words, a flicker came and went in her eyes; fright, he could have sworn.

"All that is long ago ended, since before the war," she said earnestly. "I've had no connection with them these two years and more. Andres is a good man, a splendid man! But tell me what you're doing here?"

"You take the words from my very lips!" Herron laughed lightly. "Just now I'm selling the same old machinery. I've a big shipment on the way, by good luck. And you, at this hotel?"

"Our apartment is being done over, so we're living here for the week. This place has a good wine-cellar, you know; you used to like it for that reason." Her gaze touched upon him gently, lingeringly, but she shook her head when he suggested luncheon. "No, it would not do. Andres is lunching with two influential men of the coffee cartel; it would not be proper for me to appear. Why not come to our suite this evening?"

"With the greatest pleasure," Herron responded.

She departed, slim and poised and exquisite. Herron sank back on the bench. He blinked at the flowers, at the delicate green of the banana trees, at the splashing fountain. Married to a general, a man of importance—and no longer a Nazi agent? Not likely. And she was afraid. Of what or whom? She was not the sort of woman to know fear.

"Be damned if she hasn't a soft spot in her heart for me still! Charming woman; I was lucky to escape her," he reflected. "Once a Nazi agent, always one. Well, now we can savvy why Pereira leans toward the Nazis. I think I'll lunch right here, too."

So he did, and watched with interest when the party of three men arrived. Pereira was a stiff little man with a stiff mustache, graying hair *en brosse,* and a hard eye in a red face. With him, two men in mufti who did not gesticulate or look like Brazilian coffee planters. At the moment, Herron scarcely noticed them; he was trying to appraise Pereira, and found it a bit difficult.

The man talked little, was unemotional, curt, decisive. Not once did he smile. How had such a man won the radiant Sonia? When Herron left the dining-room, Pereira was speaking, and a scrap of his words reached the American clearly.

"In war there is only yes or no," he was saying crisply. "There is no perhaps. There are no sympathies, no allowances or excuses. It is simple; orders are orders."

There was the man, a man of hard rock, unbending as flint. Herron lounged about the hotel entrance until the three came out. He was rewarded by a glimpse of Pereira's face emerging from cool shadow into hot sunlight. The face startled him as it changed and hardened to meet the world's eye. For, in the shade, something appeared that was gone an instant later; ere this, Herron had seen the brand of hell in a man's face, when no one was watching.

He almost forgot this, he almost forgot the two Germanic coffee planters, when he saw the driver of Pereira's car standing at attention. A trim Brazilian sergeant—but sight of him gave Herron a violent shock and sent him hastily back into the hotel.

"The devil! The devil!" he murmured in dismay and alarm. "I know that man! Altman, by the gods; Dirck Altman! With his mustache gone. He was Nazi attaché first at Rio, then at Caracas; many's the time we've played bridge together. And now a Brazilian soldier, a sergeant, detailed to drive Pereira. And Pereira's wife a Nazi agent. Boy, would I burn my fingers if I tried any monkey-work with our general of engineers!"

He was profoundly disturbed; Pereira must be wholly pro-German. And yet—and yet—that glimpse of the man's face emerging from shadow into sunlight lingered with him, like a half-sensed clue that somehow eluded his grasp.

TAKING hat and stick, he struck out for a walk to clear his desperately fogged head. There were plenty of old friends he knew and should look up; he wanted none of them now. He left the downtown district and headed for the old and now poor district near the river, where the early Portuguese had builded. He came at last to the strange, lonely old church fronting the river, its yellow stone carvings half effaced by time and ruin.

Here by the cracked and desolate majesty of past days, he paced along and tried to reach some coherence of thought. Altman! He had vivid memories of the fellow; a sardonic, handsome devil among devils, famed even before the war for his cruel blood-lust. Where did he come into this picture? Brazil was at war with Germany; therefore Altman was an out and out spy.

The soft old yellow masonry of four hundred years towered silent from amid its crumbled arches and eroded carvings. Now, as always, Herron gained a certain peace of mind from this vision of ancient

beauty. It soothed him, left him alert of brain, keen of eye and thought; when he turned back into the city, he was relaxed and rested. And a good thing he was.

THE afternoon was wearing away when he reached the hotel. He approached the desk to get his room key. With it, the clerk handed him the card of one Senhor Paolo Mendez, bearing the miniature emblems of several Brazilian decorations.

"Senhor Mendez asked for you half an hour ago," said the clerk. "Ah! Here he comes now, by the greatest marvel! On the stairs."

Mendez was, indeed, coming down the stairs that went to the upper floor of the hotel; a deft, polite man in his forties. Herron recognized him instantly as one of the two men who had lunched with General Pereira. He introduced himself and shook hands. Senhor Mendez would like a few words in private? But certainly; the *patio,* perhaps.

They stepped into the *patio,* found it empty, and Mendez came straight to business. He understood that Herron was interested in machinery and had a large shipment en route here, released by United States authorities. He talked rapidly and convincingly. He was willing to pay well. The machinery was vitally needed here.

Herron listened, probed shrewdly, and ticketed his man. Of German origin or descent, most certainly; a Nazi sympathizer, perhaps a Nazi agent. Who had told him about this mythical machinery? Sonia, of course. And where the deuce had Mendez just been for the past half-hour? Upstairs. With Sonia. Therefore she must have phoned him—

Aloud, the American was more than willing to deal with Senhor Mendez. Not at the present moment; he was awaiting the invoice of the shipment. Perhaps tomorrow at five? Very good. Senhor Mendez shook hands and took his guttural leave, highly gratified. Herron turned to the desk.

"General Pereira has rooms here, I think?"

"Suite B, Senhor."

Herron nodded and went upstairs; there was no elevator. So the general's luncheon pals had been Nazi agents—poor Pereira! They had him under their thumbs all right. Why had Sonia told them about that machinery shipment? Diplomacy be damned! Tom Herron was angry, and he impulsively swung away from the direction of his own room, passed down another corridor, and came to the door of Suite B. He knocked, and after a moment knocked again, imperatively.

The door was opened by Sonia.

She stared at him blankly, wide-eyed; her pale face bore the traces of tears. Recognition brought color into those pallid cheeks. Then she caught her breath.

"What do you want? You know you should not come here now—"

"What about Mendez?" asked Herron. The name was like a blow; she quivered under it. "I'd like a few words with you," he went on, more gently. "Come downstairs if you prefer. I suppose it's unconventional for you to receive a visitor when your husband's not here."

She opened the door wider. "No; come in. The worst has happened. What does anything matter now?" she said drearily. "Come in."

Herron stepped into the sitting room of a suite, and she closed the door.

"What do you mean by the worst?" he demanded sharply. For a long moment she gazed at him, emotions bursting in her face, then shook her head.

"No; it was not you who did it. Never would you do so despicable a thing!" she began. With an effort, she got herself under control. "You mentioned Mendez. Why?"

"I've had a talk with him. He broached the matter of that machinery shipment; I had told no one but you. Therefore he learned it from you. He was here."

"Yes, he was here," she said quietly,

steadily. The color had seeped out of her face anew; she was stricken, helpless, desperate. Again Herron saw fright in her eyes. "Yes, I phoned him about it. He's not a bad sort. It was to help you I did it, Tomas, for he has much money to spend. Then he came here and told me—he told me—"

Her words died; her very breath of life seemed to die. For an instant Herron thought she would collapse.

"For a Nazi, he seemed rather decent," he said. "Come, Sonia! I understand—"

"You understand nothing!" she broke in, her voice dead and dreadful. "It is Andres, my husband. Mendez came to warn me. Someone has told Andres that I—about the past—how I did work for the Germans—and has convinced him. You do not know what that means, but I know—"

Again she quivered, caught her breath, then suddenly broke down. Shaking with sobs, she dropped into a chair and put her face in her hands. Herron stood looking down at her. She was not acting; this was real. And dimly, he did begin to understand her emotion.

"Tell me, my dear," he said gently. "Let me be a friend; there is always some way out."

"Not for me." Her words were muffled, then choked by sobs. Emotion mastered her. Herron pulled up a chair, seated himself, waited. Presently she looked up at him, tears streaking the admirable make-up on her face.

"For nearly a year—I have been in hell," she said brokenly. "He—Andres—never dreamed that—that I had worked for them. I never dared to tell him. He hates them virulently.

"Hates the Nazis? Your husband does?" Herron echoed incredulously.

"Yes. His son was at school in Germany when war was declared. He was thrown into a concentration camp. He hates them virulently, with his whole soul! But for the boy's sake he must pretend; he has been trying to get his son released. He hates everything German. And he loved me, Tomas, he loved me; and I came to love him. That is the truth. And he never knew how I had been one of their agents, in the past; I never dared confess it to him."

"Naturally not, I suppose," said Herron. "And now—someone has told him?"

"Worse!" She was pouring out everything. "Last year two of them came to me, threatening to tell him about it unless I did as they wanted. Well, I did so, in little things, tricked them, played them along. They were mad wolves; not like this Mendez, who is a—decent sort. It occurred to me that I could get the son of Andres set free. They promised it if I would help, and I did. They had lied. He was not set free."

She paused, then went on. "Then came the question of the new defenses here that Andres is installing. They wanted the plans. I never even knew about them—never! But somehow they got the plans, found I had been tricking them, and in revenge went to Andres. It was this very afternoon. Mendez told me. He says they showed Andres old letters from me—everything! Even Mendez was outraged. He says it was needless. He does not know who did it—"

"Perhaps I can help," offered Herron. "If I have a word with your husband, eh?"

"No! For God's sake, no!" She half started from her chair. "You do not know him. He has been in torment, also; about his son, and other things. The Nazi influence here has been hard on him. He has seen Brazil betrayed by these people; he even had to take their orders, until war was declared. He is a man of the highest honor! He was forced to do things that seared his very soul! I was his one confidante, his one friend—and now he finds me a traitress, as he thinks! It means the end of everything between us. Nothing can help me now. To him, honor is so much, so dear—"

SHE broke off, staring at empty air. By this time Herron understood; that glimpse of Pereira's face coming from shadow into sunlight—yes, he had the clue.

"If only I had been able to get his son set free!" she went on. "That would have meant everything to Andres. It would have excused everything. It would have meant all the world! He lived for that son of his—"

Herron had no time, no chance to speak or think. With a sound like a moan, she shot to her feet and froze there, listening. Then she flung herself upon him, dragged him from his chair and propelled him violently to the doorway that opened into the next room.

"It is he—his step!" she panted. "Quickly—leave by the other door—for the love of God, quickly, quickly!"

So he was shoved into the bedroom adjoining. She slammed the door so hard that it banged open again an inch or so.

He had caught up his hat and stick, luckily. Dismay crowded him—worse to be caught here in the bedroom, than there! Run? Be damned to it! He heard a key grate in the entrance door, and the door open.

Then came the voice of Pereira; and so startling was the dreadful note in that harsh voice that Herron stood transfixed, listening.

"Ah, Sonia! I must speak with you," it said. "Yes, now—at once. And you may well be afraid of me, my dear. You have every reason. Apparently you know what I am about to say, but your tears will have no effect, for I have been given full evidence."

"Yes, I know what they have told you." Sonia sounded collected now, desperately poised. "And you would believe them, without giving me one word?"

"What, my dear? Is it not true, what they told me?"

"Yes; but—"

"Precisely. You admit it." The laugh that came from the man was even more dreadful than his heart-wrung voice. He went on, with growing anger.

"You cannot deny the evidence written by yourself. It spoke for you, my dear. And the crowning infamy of all—not content with spying upon me, with outraging my honor as a man and a soldier, you betray my country itself! They know all about the work I have been doing. They have the defense plans, they know everything."

An instant of silence. Evidently she was too proud to counter with the least denial, or too afraid. Then her voice came, very calmly.

"Very well. And thus jumping at conclusions, what do you intend to do?"

"What I should do," came the response, "if instead of my wife, it were my dearest friend or my own son who had thus betrayed the honor of a soldier and his country—"

Tom Herron gathered his wits swiftly. He knew these Latins; his knowledge of their psychology, his ready sympathy and invention had made him tops as a salesman. Now, upon sudden impulse, he shoved open the door; and barely in time. General Pereira stood there with a pistol in his hand. At sight of Herron his words failed; he was paralyzed by the intrusion.

Before he could speak, Herron seized the chance, stepped into the room, and bowed.

"Ha! Do you know, General, that I made the same mistake myself? Yes, upon my word!" he said, lightly, easily, confidentially, as though to an old friend. "This woman, I understood, is a Nazi agent. I have seen the proofs of it. So I shall denounce her to her husband, General Pereira himself! And then what? Why, in the very act of coming here—I learned the truth about it!"

Audacity—always audacity! It was the one slim chance. Pereira stood as though thunderstruck, his eyes widening on the American, who laughed softly and extended his leather-framed Intelligence

card. Now or never was the time to nail his man!

"Permit me; my name is Herron, captain in the Intelligence of the United States Army. An American of the north, who dared to enter your rooms like a thief—because I have some vital information, news of the greatest importance, about several things. About your son in Germany, for one thing. About Madame, here—"

HE BOWED to Sonia, who was absolutely frozen by his sudden appearance and also by his words. Before she could find voice, he hurried on to get his most important point over.

"And lastly!" he exclaimed, with a burst of vehemence for more effect, "about the person who is the actual traitor — this damned Nazi spy whom you have trusted implicitly, and who has sought vengeance on your wife because she would not join in his treachery!"

Pereira, who had listened in cold hauteur, unbent at these words.

"Senhor! You—you are aware of what you say?"

"Oh, yes. The imperative thing is to undo these mistakes and catch the rascal who is responsible, and who stole the plans of your defense system." Herron was working on the man now as upon a pliant instrument. "Yes," he continued musingly, "it is quite true that in past years one Sonia Leontoff did indeed act as a very minor German agent here in Brazil. It was of no consequence; one of those things we do, and regret, and cease doing—as she ceased long before she became Senhora Pereira."

"Senhor, you appear to know a good deal of my private affairs!" said the general, stiffly.

"That is my business," Herron replied, smiling. "You see, after her marriage these blackguards tried to force her into resuming the work. She refused. Later, in the hope of getting your son released from Germany, she pretended compliance. They discovered that she was tricking them. They denounced her to you—however, the chief thing now is to get hold of this Nazi spy who wears the uniform of Brazil."

These brisk words stung Pereira, jerked at him, brought him to life.

"That is true, true!" he exclaimed. "Who is this man you accuse?"

The sergeant who drives your car."

"What!" Incredulity widened the flinty gaze of the general. "Impossible! Joao Morales is a faithful soldier, well known, decorated—"

"Sure; the Nazis aren't fools. They don't wear spy badges," said Herron. "Get him here, if you like, and we'll prove the charge in short order."

"If this is American bluff, Senhor, you'll regret it!" Pereira took refuge from his amazed chagrin in anger. "Your impudent effrontery shall be put to the proof. Sergeant Morales is now waiting in the courtyard with my car."

HE STEPPED to the telephone and ordered that Sergeant Morales be sent up. His service pistol vanished. He swung around and eyed Herron in critical appraisement.

"This intrusion, Senhor, the strange story you tell—"

"Will carry its own proof, General." Herron took a chair by the door, settled himself comfortably, and produced a cigarette. "I don't wish your faithful sergeant to get a look at me before he's well inside the room. And if I were you," he added, "I'd keep that gun handy. Sorry I haven't one myself. And send the senhora into another room. Don't think for one minute this spy will bow politely and hold out his wrists for the handcuffs!"

"I stay here," spoke up Sonia. She was staring at Herron in genuine amazement. "Senhor, is it true that you serve the North American Intelligence?"

"Quite, Senhora," replied Herron. He knew that Pereira was hanging on every word. "If you doubt it, my dear general,

permit me to say that you lunched today with two Nazi agents."

Pereira flushed. "Those gentlemen are public officials," he said stiffly.

"But also Nazi agents. And you knew it. I don't accuse you, mind!" Herron went on. "I have no doubt of your integrity. Possibly those two men could help in procuring the release of your son from Germany. But you perceive, my dear general, how deceitful appearances may be. You might be accused of dealing with the Nazis—just as your wife was accused."

PEREIRA'S mustache moved as his lips compressed, but he made no reply. This shot had finished him. He was still wearing his army kepi; now he removed it, and with his handkerchief mopped sweat from his forehead.

He had changed. No longer was he the sternly dramatic Spartan nerved to kill the thing he loved. Something had broken in him. He shot queer probing glances, now at Herron, now at Sonia, across the room. A knock sounded at the door.

"Enter!" he rapped out.

Into the room came Sergeant Morales, and stood at attention.

"Close the door and come here," said Pereira. The sergeant obeyed, paying no attention to Herron. He stood before the general, his back to the American. And now Herron spoke, calmly and quietly.

"Good afternoon, Dirck—or should I say Herr Altman?"

The sergeant did not move a muscle. For a moment the room seemed engulfed in a monstrous swollen silence. Herron's chair creaked as he rose, leaning on his stick. He stepped forward and swung around to face Morales.

The brown, hard features of the sergeant quivered slightly in recognition, then became stolid and composed again. Herron nodded amiably to him.

"So you remember me. Well, the game's up. Mendez and the others were arrested a little while ago; they split on you to save their own necks. You're out of luck, Altman."

Morales remained absolutely impassive; he was yielding to no such bluff. But now Sonia took an unexpected hand. Her laugh rang upon the room—a laugh soft and deadly.

"I can also identify this honest fellow," she spoke up. "Altman, you call him? But I knew him as Z-38, operating direct from Berlin, and—"

At this, Altman abruptly cracked—so swiftly that even the alert Herron had not the slightest warning. Perhaps he feared lest Sonia clinch his fate as a spy; perhaps she might indeed have done so. At all events, Herron's prediction was only too well verified.

Altman took one slithering step backward. An imprecation broke from him; a small pistol seemed to leap into his hand. He fired, and General Pereira pitched over sideways. He fired again—just as Herron's stick swept up and struck the inside of his wrist, unflexing his finger-grip. The bullet went wild, the pistol dropped to the floor. The stick went to the floor with it, as Herron leaped in on his man. He met a savage blow that rocked his head back and staggered him, and Altman darted to the door—

TOO late! Herron caught him just as it opened, knocked him off his feet and dropped to pin him down. As easily pin down the whirlwind! Tom Herron got a bad surprise there. Hard and fast as he might be, the Nazi was harder and faster, a thing of coiled steel fighting for very life. Herron got him by the throat, then felt his hold broken, as a whirl of agony swept over him.

Altman was giving him the works, and he could not save himself. He fought desperately, lashing in cruel blows, but another knee-punch stretched him out and Altman was on top of him with fingers gouging. Herron barely did save his eyes —and there, not two feet away, lay the

fallen pistol! Altman reached out for it.

A yell of pain burst from him. Sonia's heel came down squarely on his outstretched hand, grinding it against the polished hardwood. The pistol went skittering away. Altman leaped upright as though on springs. He struck the woman heavily across the face, knocking her sideways—then he was off—out of the room and gone. Sonia recovered, scooped up the pistol, but the door slammed before she could use it.

Herron, sick and dizzy and faint, came to one elbow. Pereira was clutching at a chair, his right leg dragging. Herron came swaying to his feet, half fell against the wall, then summoned his last energy and stumbled across the room.

Sonia had just unclasped the French windows that opened on a small iron balcony above the courtyard. As Herron came to her side she stepped out and went to the balcony rail. The general's car stood almost directly underneath. Altman appeared from the hotel entrance, hurrying to the car. Sonia called at him and he turned, pausing, looking up.

The pistol in her hand jumped, then jumped a second time. Herron remembered, later, that he did not hear the explosions at all; nothing registered except that little kick of the flame-spurting pistol.

Altman's hand fell from the car door. He spun around, sank down, and lay in the white sunlight with a dark splotch growing on his tunic.

For Tom Herron, the next events were dully fogged. He was sick and hurt and his brain was paralyzed; one bad crack across the nape of the neck had almost finished him. People were rushing about, and the air was filled with excited Brazilian voices that showered Portuguese in steady volleys.

Presently the room quieted. Herron found himself comfortable in a chair, with Sonia pressing a cool drink upon him. General Pereira lay upon a sofa; a surgeon was just turning away from him with laughing reassurance.

"You'll be all right in a day or two; a mere leg puncture—"

Drilled in the leg, eh? And the general had never used his ready pistol at all! Herron gulped his drink gratefully, and his brain cleared, Pereira was talking at him, but he missed the words; something about Altman, and keeping the thing quiet. The fellow had gone out of his head and tried to kill his general, and Sonia had finished him. It would never do to tell spy stories.

Herron finished his drink. He looked at Sonia, who sat holding her husband's hand. Rather, Pereira was holding hers, and bringing it to his lips. Her pale face was happy, her eyes were warm and richly eloquent of many things.

"Senhor," said Pereira, "I owe you a great deal. Permit me to offer heartfelt thanks and my sentiments the most distinguished!"

"Thanks," said Herron. "I presume that you'll now make complete changes in your system of defenses about the city and airfields, since the Nazis seem to have copped your plans?"

"That will, obviously, be necessary."

"Then may I suggest that you make the changes with the greatest secrecy, and meanwhile offer Mendez or some similar Naziphile all details of the present system—in exchange for the release of your son from Germany?" Herron chuckled as he spoke. "It will do no harm, and I shall be happy to lend any assistance that may be required."

Pereira surveyed him for a long moment. The hard eyes chilled and glittered, the stiff features firmed, and the ghostly suspicion of a smile touched those uncompromising features. Then the general extended his hand.

"My friend, they have excellent champagne in this hotel," he said solemnly. "As you say in America of the North—shake!"

REWARDS INCORPORATED

By JAMES NORMAN & RICHARD WORTHINGTON

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

THE scene of the story is Preston, not far from Chicago and run by a very corrupt political Machine. The city has a motto, "In Preston Everything Is Possible. Do It."

Piper Hamlin is a rhyming reporter getting photographs and opinions from the man on the street. His paper sent him to interview:

William Stevens, who is bucking the Machine under the mayor:

Boss Bent. Piper finds a stranger, a very fat man, in Stevens' office and takes his picture at Stevens' desk, thinking he is the man he was sent to interview. Piper's boss:

Abbott tells him that Stevens has been murdered and demands the plates of the picture Piper took. But before he can get it, Piper is kidnaped and it looks as if he'd be bumped off—presumably by the Machine. But he escapes and reaches Chicago. Here he is again captured by the owners of Rewards Incorporated:

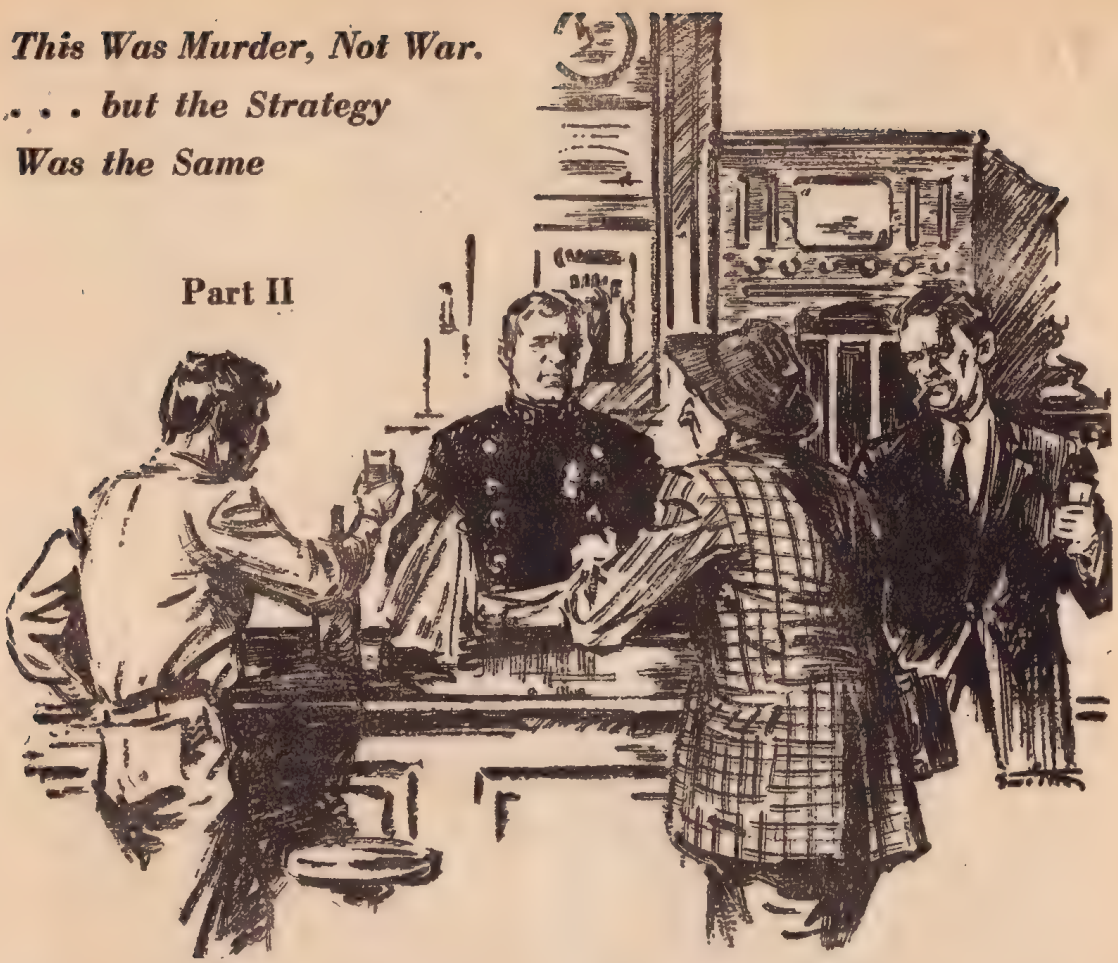
Muir, Denny, Wegg and the *Angel.*

Their racket is finding people for whom

This Was Murder, Not War.

. . . but the Strategy Was the Same

Part II



rewards are offered, and his newspaper wants Piper back. He thinks he'll be framed for Stevens' murder, but all Rewards Incorporated wants is cash on delivery. Piper thinks the outlook is pretty grim.

VIII

8:30 A.M.

ON Wednesday morning, the sun lost its battle with the thick layer of cumulus lying over Chicago, and turned up somewhat later, belligerent and out of sorts, to glow tentatively over Preston. Here it appeared to be somewhat reassured to find the small and brawling city carrying on in its own inimitable and peculiar way.

Even before the sun arrived, for instance, a seventy-four-year-old gentleman with only one arm made domestic news by accurately and happily putting the slug on an eighty-nine-year-old contemporary in a heated discussion arising from the disputed charms of a fair young belle of fifty-seven.

And just about the time that the sun struggled through to beam sulkily over Preston, during a series of pre-election arrests of political malcontents in the Bandbox wards an important local financier was tapped on the shoulder and led off to jail without a protest. He found out in court that the arrest was entirely unintentional, the policeman having wished solely to move him aside.

Later that day, the banker fired a clerk who had worked for him for thirty years; but this item never made the papers.

But even before this, another element had entered the city—an element with considerably more disruptive tendencies than any that had heretofore being allowed to sneak into Boss Bent's snug little kingdom. Rewards Inc. had arrived, trailing a dis-

pirited and reluctant Piper Hamlin, at the luxurious Bentwood Arms.

Not even Angel Auden's highest-voltage smile could stir Piper from his gloom, or stop his ears from the voices crying out warnings of disaster within him. His itch had started in again, too. His itch, in fact, was definitely allergic to Preston. It began to act up almost the minute he set foot within the city limits, proclaiming, with the accuracy of the Weather Bureau's most subtle and complicated mechanism, the presence of things that were wrong and noisome and dangerous.

Actually, as Piper well knew even with his limited residence in Preston, the Bentwood Arms was no place for Rewards Inc. at all.

It was the largest and finest apartment hotel in town, and it was regarded as a sort of second City Hall. Facing parklike Pizarro Drive and insolently overlooking the handsome lake front, it was Boss Bent's own private dream come true. So enraptured was he with its magnificence that, while building it, he had permitted only enough grafting to keep the faithful happy.

Boss Bent occupied a top-floor penthouse when he wasn't in residence at his country place, situated with considerable forethought across the Illinois line.

Most of the town's bosses, big, little, and medium, felt it advisable to take apartments beneath its red-tiled, semi-Spanish roof. Rent was high; but its landlord's favor commanded a high price at all times. There were certain other advantages. On rainy days the commissioners could meet there without journeying five blocks to City Hall proper; the bellboys engaged by the management were famous for their ability to produce a quart, a blonde, or a sure thing at Pimlico with facility and promptness; and finally the Arms was provided with a staggering amount of exits and entrances, including one through a tunnel that didn't come up for air until it had traveled for five blocks underground. All this made for distinct convenience.

MUIR had chosen to make it his stronghold, however, because he had always admired the strategy of carrying the battle to the heart of enemy territory. And the Bentwood Arms was enemy territory all right, Piper thought. He felt as if every bellhop who brought Angel another in the long procession of Bourbon old-fashioneds she had been consuming since early morning might be the state executioner in disguise.

Piper watched Angel's drinking with an absent-minded fascination, and thought gloomy thoughts about one crusading lawyer, very dead, a pink gardenia, a snapshot of an A.E.F. doughboy, a fat man dubbed Diogenes and one disinquiring reporter with a noose around his neck.

The pale aquamarine walls of Reward suite contained a vast amount of professional bustle. Only Angel was relaxed, her lovely golden head resting on Piper's shoulder.

At a small desk in one corner, surrounded by maps of Preston, city telephone directories, registers of municipal employees, briefs of state and city laws and ordinances, back files of the *Chronicle* and the *News,* Gavin Muir sat, lean and hawkish, like the general of an invading army studying the terrain.

He leaned back in his chair, his sharp eyes heavy-lidded but alert and filled with knowledge. He sighed. He knew Preston and the intricacies of its machinery more thoroughly than the oldest resident. He had grazed through the town's lush statistics with the close-cropping thoroughness of a hungry lamb in green pastures. Now he could get to work. He could feel his knowledge flexing his muscles and lean sinews. Even his nostrils flared contentedly.

Lincoln Wegg was working across the room, quietly arranging the contents of Reward face-file—a collection of endless thirty-five millimeter negatives—reproductions of reward posters, fingerprints and criminal records. When he had his files

under control, Lincoln Wegg moved over to the window and stood there chasing imaginary raindrops down the windowpane with his thin, busy fingers.

Denny, in a bright pink quilted dressing gown, was working with great intensity on a stack of wheats dripping with syrup. He grinned at Piper with a look of rare content.

Angel put down her glass. "Still worried?" she asked Piper.

"Heck, no. What've I got to worry about?" Piper demanded. From his point of vantage slightly above her, he could see the lace edging of her pink rayon slip hitching up above the neckline of her bright blue house-coat. He wondered if Angel ever managed to get her clothes on without leaving some little detail like that to jar the view. And if she did, how long they stayed that way.

SUCKING thoughtfully on a cherry that she'd fished from her cocktail glass, Angel nodded dreamily. "That's right, lover," she said. "It wouldn't be sensible to worry yet. Things are going to get ever so much worse."

"That's great," Piper said with feeling. How could they get any worse unless somebody jerked the gallows' trap out from under his feet? At that, he could almost feel it starting to give.

The Machine was already casting about for a stooge to hang the Stevens killing on. And bringing this crowd of shrewd highbinders into town—and that's what the Machine was sure to believe he'd done—would only make them sore, more anxious to get him than ever.

Of course, maybe somebody'd have him kidnaped again. With a smashed skull or a couple of bullets nestling against his ribs, he wouldn't have to worry so much about getting hanged.

He looked at Wegg's active, restless fingers and vented his spleen in the little gray man's direction. "If that bird is the fancy expert you people claim he is, what's he doing mixed up with a penny-ante crowd like this?"

Angel looked hurt. "In the first place, this is no penny-ante crowd, sugar-pie. As somebody's going to find out damned quick. And in the second place, Lincoln works for us because we're trying to find his wife for him." Angel looked around for some place to dispose of the orange rind that had followed the maraschino in her attentions. She finally tucked it neatly behind the cushions.

"How long has Mrs. Wegg been missing?"

"Not Mrs. Wegg, honeykins. Mrs. Potter. She's his common-law wife or something." She remembered he'd asked a question. "Only seven years," she said. "He doesn't mind. He never liked her much."

"Then why—?"

Angel lifted a hand and touched his cheek. "Try reading his mind, sweet. I never dared ask."

It didn't take much, Piper reflected, to read Angel's mind. It worked with a beautiful smoothness in exactly two gear-speeds. Men and money. Or vice versa. Sometimes both at once and then, he guessed, you really had something.

The suede-blue depths of Angel's eyes met Piper's and lingered. Piper's heart began to chug like a locomotive on the Allegheny grades. No women, he told himself. No women. Remember Glory and what a beating she gave you. It didn't seem to do much good.

But Muir's bleak gray eye upon him did. He wondered nervously how long Muir had been watching them like that.

"Angel!" Muir said in that low, flicking voice.

The girl lifted her head from Piper's shoulder. She sighed. "All right. Recess is over."

Piper noticed that she never called Muir by any of those easy endearments that she lavished on every other man in sight, and wondered if it meant anything.

Piper suddenly remembered the clipping he'd torn from the paper he'd bought at the station. More or less as a movement of appeasement and diversion he brought it out now.

"Opposition sheet, the *Press,*" he said casually. "Full of lies most of the time, but pictures don't lie. Thought you might like to see this." He handed the photo to Muir, who had risen and crossed the room.

The picture was one of those flash-bulb banquet things with everybody contriving to look both scared and smug at once. "The election shindig," he said. "The flower of Mayor Bent's knighthood. They always celebrate election beforehand, I heard, because afterward they're so busy brushing in the pennies there isn't time. This was taken Monday night at Municipal Auditorium."

Muir looked patient, and still slightly icy.

Piper's finger moved across the photo, paused at random. "Look—gardenias—everybody in the whole picture's wearing 'em."

Muir smiled a thin smile. "I'd already seen this, Piper," Muir said, his voice edged with just the suggestion of irony. "What did you think you made of it?"

"Stevens was found with one of those gardenias in his hand, wasn't he? Wouldn't you say it meant he'd attended that banquet?"

"At a Machine party? Ummm. I hardly think a reformer would find a welcome at Bent's festive board, do you?"

Piper reddened and felt deflated.

"However," Muir said, softening, "you're doing pretty well for a lad who didn't want to get mixed up in things." Muir watched him hopefully.

But Piper's next words were disappointing. "I was just passing this on," he said quickly. "I still want to stay clear of the whole thing. As clear as they'll let me."

Annoyance rested briefly in Muir's eyes. He felt instinctively that Hamlin was better than this—that his determination to fight shy of problems that concerned him vitally, not to mention his fierce indifference to a setup that smelled to high heaven, was not really characteristic of him. Piper Hamlin acted like a man who had shut himself deliberately into a tomb. But it hadn't made him happy.

At least, Muir thought scornfully, that was one way of looking at it. Maybe he'd been mistaken. Maybe all there was to Piper Hamlin was a streak of bright yellow where a spine should be. Still, Muir wasn't ready to give up. He'd keep on pushing Piper forward, shoving him around. Perhaps he could still be brought to life. Muir was seldom wrong about people. It had become a matter of pride with him not to permit Piper to betray that first swift analysis Muir had made of him.

"Besides," Muir went on, "the total attendance at the banquet was around seven hundred and twenty according to this caption. Say Stevens wasn't there. But suppose his murderer was. And the Municipal Auditorium is just across the street from Stevens' office. I'd find a certain charm in working on a case with a mere seven hundred and twenty suspects. Look at all the pictures Linc could take for his files."

Piper shook his head glumly. "It's still no go. Not if Stevens wasn't killed until Tuesday morning."

"We don't know for certain yet that he was. And besides, as I understand it, the pink gardenia is a sort of party badge in Preston. Like the derby hats most of them wear."

Piper nodded. "Bent has a greenhouse. He likes the boys to wear those pink things because they're nice and expensive."

"He has some lovely ideas, that man," Angel sighed. "I wish I could have thought of half of them. And have either of you two Wizards of Oz given a thought to the possibility that the killer might have been against the Machine and left the gardenia just to throw suspicion the other way? That practically takes in the whole town, if you

want suspects by the gross lot." She seemed pleased with her helpfulness.

Piper took back his clipping and stared at it with vacant eyes. Then cold fingers pressed down on his spine as he found something else—something he hadn't seen before. A fat man's face.

"Hey," he cried. "That's Diogenes. Right there. Look!"

"Positive?" said Muir sharply.

Piper, wishing he hadn't spoken, hedged. He wasn't sure he wanted Diogenes found. Things were bad now. Stirring them up might make them worse. "Not dead sure, no," he said.

Piper tucked the picture back into his wallet.

"The police will probably be at the Lakeside Building with the Vern girl. Since she is, presumably, our client, perhaps we'd better get along."

"The police?" Piper blinked suspiciously. He still couldn't get over feeling that Muir and Company would gaily throw him to the lions if it suited their books. Their pocketbooks, more definitely.

"It's all right. Just tell them about Diogenes," Muir said coldly. "They'll forget about you."

"You sound awfully sure of that, but it's my neck—"

MUIR shrugged. He turned to Angel. "Colonel Abbott of the *Chronicle* will be along shortly with a certified check. Treat him kindly, my dear."

"I like that," Angel snorted. "The first time I'm rude to a man with a certified check will be when I'm dead." She paused. "Don't you think I'd better cash it right away?"

Piper muttered something about vultures, and blood money.

Muir ignored him. "Restrain your impatience, milady Croesus. Unless Abbott's the killer, his check will be bona fide."

As Piper followed Muir out of the room, his mind was busy with a new train of thought. Abbott! Why not? Who'd sent him over to Stevens' office in the first place? Abbott. And why couldn't that have been a frame just to put him on the scene of the crime? And who, finally, had offered a reward for his return? Abbott again.

Piper's expression became even more gloomy. In a town like this, you couldn't trust your own grandmother.

IX

9:30 A.M.

BOSS BENT'S bull-like bellow roared over the transom and flooded out under the door-crack and filled the whole corridor.

"I'm sick and tired of all the lies you've been telling! You told the police yourself Stevens was frightened. Nervous as a cat. So if the killers wasn't a bunch of lousy reds—it must've been suicide, see?"

Rhea Vern's "No" came in a voice that was tortured and despairing. "No, he wouldn't have. Not ever. Not Mr. Stevens."

"Then"—triumphantly from Mayor Bent—"then it was them reds. Like I said." It was one of Mayor Bent's cherished beliefs that an apparent ignorance of elementary grammar conveyed a politically desirable effect, lending the common touch, making him just one of the boys. "It—it must have been," said Rhea reluctantly. "Unless that Mr. Hamlin—"

"We'd better put a stop to that, m'lad," Muir said and elbowed through the door with Piper at his heels. Rhea's dark eyes flashed to them gratefully.

"He wants me to say Stevens—*Mr.* Stevens—killed himself—"

Piper felt an irrational tug of pity for the girl. Besides his itch was bothering him again. Before he thought, he said, "That's crazy! Nobody, even in this stinking excuse for a town, is going to believe that Stevens hanged himself and then planted the knife in his own chest. Or would you

rather have it the other way around?"

Muir gave him an approving glance.

The glance Bent gave him was approving too. In a kind of hungry way. Like a lion, Piper thought wildly, gazing in fond contemplation at the dinner that has just bounced unthinkingly down a jungle path.

"So you're back!" he snapped at Piper. And Piper could see that Bent was not reluctantly considering the abandonment of his beloved reds in favor of Piper as pet suspect. "Where've you *been?*"

"Me—" Piper's voice tapered thinly. A sick sensation settled coldly and lumpily in his stomach. He'd certainly pulled this one down on top of himself. Without a bit of help from anybody.

Muir's voice, like cold, distant steel, was prodding at his back. "Tell them, Hamlin."

So Piper did. "I didn't *go* anywhere. I was kidnaped."

At first Mayor Bent thought that was hilariously funny. Then he changed his mind.

His flabby cheeks crimsoned with indignation, his wattles shook, his eyes popped. He looked like a man beset with an apoplectic stroke. Hamlin was crazy. Hamlin was a liar. Hamlin was a detestable little upstart who had dared to suggest that in the fair city of Preston could occur so loathsome a crime as kidnaping.

After a time, Muir pricked, as with a swordpoint, the scarlet balloon of Mayor Bent's wrath. "You'd better hear the rest of what Hamlin has to say," he told Bent quietly.

Piper furnished more details, even including the lavender nude at the Salvation Beer parlor. He wished he'd left that out. The heavenly twins were nightmarish enough without the addition of that final, incredible detail.

Behind him, he heard a deep chuckle of appreciative and impersonal amusement. District Attorney Halliday had joined the party, followed by Police Captain Kennedy. His eyes lighted speculatively on Muir.

"You're Muir," he said. "You brought our fugitive back. Rather heartless, don't you think?"

Muir spread his tapering hands. "Business," he sighed, "is business. Besides, I've always rather wanted to visit Preston."

"Your work, though, is finished now surely?"

"Mr. Muir represents me," Rhea put in.

Halliday nodded. "I see. Sit down, sit down. All of you. Captain Kennedy has something to say."

Kennedy steered smudgy brown eyes around at all of them. Slowly. One after the other. Suddenly, his jaw thrust out and the powerful bulk of his body tilted toward Piper.

"Speak your piece first," he commanded. "Why do you think you were kidnaped?"

Piper said the first thing that popped into his head. "I took a picture here in this office a little while before they found Stevens' body. There was a fat man here—had a big nose like Diogenes' lantern, made him stand out. I thought it was Stevens at the time. But it wasn't. Maybe he didn't want his picture floating around to connect him with the murder." The more Piper thought about it the better he liked it.

Kennedy thrust out a hairy jaw. "Let's see your picture."

Piper, looking sour, admitted he didn't have it.

Kennedy snorted. "Thought so! You are the only one who saw the fat man. You took a picture of him but you haven't got it. Want to know what I think?" Piper didn't, but Kennedy told him. "I think you made him up. Come on, admit it. There wasn't any fat guy. You never took a picture at all." He put his pudgy palm against Piper's chest and pushed him back.

Piper didn't like it. "Quit shoving me around," he snapped. "And why don't you admit a couple of things? The pink

gardenia you found with the body has got you all steamed up because it proves somebody from the Machine is mixed up in this. So you're all sticking together to cover up for the organization and ganging up on me. Maybe you can tell me why I killed Stevens? I never saw the guy. I didn't even know what he looked like!"

"Sit down," Kennedy shouted. "And shut up!"

Halliday moved forward. "Take it easy, Kennedy. And you too, Hamlin. If you killed Stevens, we'll find out why you did it, without much trouble."

"And how about the derby I found up here Tuesday? The extra one. Who did *that* belong to—Joe Frisco?"

"What derby?" Kennedy asked, his eyes wide with innocence.

"The one Mayor Bent took while you were questioning me," Piper said, his voice rising.

The mayor shrugged and shook his head.

"Mayor Bent didn't have any derby," Kennedy said and pushed Piper into a chair. Piper, subsiding, hoped that he had scored at least a draw.

"Mr. Hamlin's right about one thing," Rhea Vern said, hesitantly. "There was *someone* in the office yesterday morning."

KENNEDY grunted. "Sure. Hamlin. Like you said yesterday."

"No, it wasn't," said Rhea Vern, shaking her head. "He—Mr. Stevens, I mean—had an appointment. I think with someone who had some important evidence to give him." She hesitated. "Political evidence."

"An anarchist!" Mayor Bent announced. Nobody paid any attention.

Piper gazed thoughtfully at Rhea Vern. One minute she was practically breaking her neck to drag him into this. The next, she was equally eager to involve somebody else.

The way it looked to Piper, the Vern girl was hiding something and the only thing she was really interested in was confusing the issue as much as she could. She wasn't on anybody's team but her own. And she was scared, too.

"What evidence?" Halliday said smoothly.

"I—I've no idea."

"Show the district attorney the banquet picture, Piper," Muir put in.

Piper dragged the clipping out. "There's your fat man," he said, pointing to Diogenes in the group.

Halliday smiled faintly. "That could be anybody."

"It could be Veronica Lake," Piper insisted, "but it isn't. And it proves that Diogenes is a machine man. And I don't mean a robot."

"No Preston jury would accept this almost indecipherable likeness as evidence," Halliday said, spreading his hands apart.

"No *Preston* jury," Piper agreed. He knew he wasn't doing himself any good by needling these guys. But he couldn't seem to help it. It was a pleasure just to see them squirm.

Muir's hooded eyes blinked stonily at Halliday. "I think we may assume that Hamlin's fat man is real, that he had an appointment with Stevens, and that he was bringing him some kind of information. Stevens expected him, because the first time Hamlin came up the door was open—"

Muir broke off abruptly, frowning; and Piper's eyes followed Mayor Bent's sudden, graceless swoop across the room to the outer door, where a man Piper hadn't noticed before was leaning quietly against the wall. He was wearing yellow brogues and his face was hidden by the newspaper he held in his hands, just as it had been yesterday.

Mayor Bent thrust Piper's banquet-photo clipping behind the newspaper. The newspaper came down and for the first time, Piper saw Yellow Brogues' face. He shivered. Yellow Brogues was John Fingers, usually known more simply by his last name. It made him sound sort of sinister. And Piper had heard from more

than one quarter in Preston that sinister was putting it mildly.

He had a leathery face almost the color of his shoes, and the eyes of a lizard. They concentrated for a moment on the picture held before them; then without a word, Fingers turned and melted from the room.

Piper wildly sought Muir's gaze. What had just happened meant only one thing. The Machine realized that Diogenes was a danger. They were going to put him quietly out of the way. If they got to him first, Diogenes would never be seen again.

Piper rushed for the door, but Kennedy grabbed him by the coat and yanked him back. "Play nice now," the captain warned.

Mayor Bent turned in the doorway and gave them a jaunty wave of the hand. "Diogenes. Tsk-tsk," he murmured in a tone of jovial reproof, and left. Piper understood now why the mayor had questioned Rhea Vern in person. He'd wanted to find out what Stevens' secretary might have that linked up his Machine to the killing. Rhea, if she knew anything definite, hadn't given it away. But Piper had told Mayor Bent all he wanted to know. With Fingers' lethal assistance, the matter was about to be disposed of. The mayor, satisfied, had withdrawn. It couldn't, really, have been neater.

Every time, Piper thought wildly, I go butting into things somebody gets hurt. Only this time it's not me. The thought was not especially comforting.

Halliday told him to go back and sit down. "Nobody's trying to frame you, Hamlin," he said. "The fat man's not important."

"Important!" Piper moaned. "Maybe he's not, but he's all I've got."

Halliday crossed the room and shut the door. He stared at Rhea and Muir and Piper as impressively as if he had been about to announce his candidacy for the governorship. "Tell them, Captain Kennedy."

Kennedy cleared his throat. "The coroner says Stevens wasn't murdered Tuesday morning. According to his report, Stevens was bumped off about fifteen hours before we found his body. Sometime Monday night."

Relief hit Piper like a shower of lovely golden coins. He gazed jubilantly at Muir, who shook his head slightly. What was the matter with the guy? Didn't he realize that this put Piper in the clear? Or didn't he care?

RHEA'S throat made a funny, involuntary noise. She tried to cover her evident panic by saying, "He was here—dead in that closet—on Tuesday morning when I opened the office?"

Muir reached over, touching her hands, quieting her.

Unfastening his briefcase, Halliday brought out a legal document. "This is Stevens' will," he said. "It sheds a rather interesting light on the killing. You're familiar with its provisions, Miss Vern?"

Rhea Vern shook her head, her cheeks faintly pale.

"What time did you leave the office Monday?"

"At five. As usual."

"Was Stevens still here?"

"Yes, he was," she said. "He often worked late."

Halliday nodded. "Ordinarily, Miss Vern, congratulations would be in order. But under these circumstances—" He hesitated, rustling the will delicately. "The provisions of this will are rather peculiar. For instance, Stevens left nothing to any relatives."

"He had none," Rhea said.

"I see. Well— Stevens has established a trust fund of forty thousand dollars to carry on his political investigations. Misguided, of course, but that is not our concern. The fund is to be administered jointly by Colonel Abbott of the *News*—and you, Miss Vern."

Abbott again, Piper thought. He popped up everywhere.

"Colonel Abbott is to receive, as well, Mr. Stevens' own Distinguished Service Cross and certificate, and one belonging to a certain John Merrett. That is understandable. Colonel Abbott and Stevens were in France together. They've been close friends ever since. But now we come back to Miss Vern again."

Halliday hesitated, his eyes resting on Rhea's face like an accusation. "In addition to two small bequests—one of a thousand dollars to Adam Lake, the elevator operator in this building; the other to the charwoman, Mrs. O'Connor—he left the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars to Miss Vern. Can you think of any reason why he should have left you any such amount?"

Rhea Vern's dark eyes clouded apprehensively. She closed them quickly and when she opened them again, there were tears on the lashes.

"I didn't know about the will," she said swiftly. "I—I suppose he did it because —well, because he'd asked me to marry him."

"Had you said yes?"

"N-no. That is, not exactly. I wasn't in love with him, but he was good and kind and generous—"

"Extremely generous, I should say," Halliday sneered.

"I think I would have accepted him. Perhaps I even gave him the impression that I would—"

"I suggest, Miss Vern, that you deliberately let him think so, in order that he would make you such a bequest. And I suggest further that you had no intention whatever of marrying him. You were in love with somebody else. Don't bother to deny it. We have found several witnesses who can testify that you have been seen frequently of late in the company of a man other than your employer, to whom you profess such devotion."

Rhea's head lowered. The gesture was a confession.

"We don't know who the man is. But I'm afraid that it very much looks as if you and he, once you were sure that Mr. Stevens' affection for you would be so gratifyingly expressed, came to this office on Monday night and killed him. To avoid the painful necessity of a marriage that there was no longer any reason to go through with."

"No!" Rhea cried. "It's not true—not a word—"

"Come, come," Muir protested smoothly. "Either Miss Vern had no intention of marrying him at all and tricked him into the bequest—or else she was actually about to marry Stevens for his money, until he made his will and it was no longer necessary. Your logic, Halliday, needs combing out a little. You really can't have it both ways."

Halliday glared at him. "One way or the other, the marriage-money motive still holds." His eyes swiveled to Piper. "And I can really see no reason why this unknown man should not have been our friend, Mr. Hamlin, here."

Piper jumped six inches inside of his skin. "Hey!" he growled.

"In fact, I find irresistible reasons to believe that he may have been. He has been with us only a short time—and our reports about Miss Vern's unidentifiable companion are all of recent date. Colonel Abbott has testified to Hamlin's reluctance to come to this office on Tuesday morning; and that is a circumstance I can understand only as an indication that Hamlin already knew that Stevens was dead in the closet, and that the scene of his crime was the last place on earth he wished to visit.

"And finally, although Mr. Muir is supposedly working only for Miss Vern—it was through him that Mr. Hamlin came back to Preston. In fact, Muir's whole manner proclaims to high heaven that he is acting on behalf of both Miss Vern *and* Hamlin, her guilty lover!"

Piper's stomach rose and met his descending heart in a halfway collision. The noose had been jerked tight around his

throat again. This time, he thought a little wildly, they were going to lynch Sundown Jim for sure.

X

10:15 A.M.

PIPER and Rhea spent the next twenty minutes vehemently denying that they had ever met before Tuesday morning and succeeding not one jot in disturbing Halliday's complacent satisfaction.

Finally he admitted with considerable reluctance that he didn't have quite enough evidence to hold them—yet. And Muir, with fingers that gripped as tightly as cables wound in velvet, dragged Piper away.

"We shouldn't have left her in there," Piper said. "Halliday'll tear her into small pieces."

"She'll be all right," Muir said. "It's you they're really trying to pin this on."

"But just the same—"

"I thought," said Muir coldly, "that your whole idea was to stay out of things—to crawl into your own private hole and pull the roof in over your head. You can't do that and still go charging around rescuing damsels in distress, you know."

Piper flushed miserably. "I—I guess I'm a little mixed up," he said defensively.

Muir nodded. "Half man, half amoeba," he said bitingly. Piper's flush deepened.

"Look," he said hotly. "I used to be the champion of all crusaders. Every time I saw a bully taking candy from a kid I'd take a swing at him. Only I was always the one who went down for the count. I took a hell of a beating before I finally found out that truth plays rougher than fiction. I was slapped down so hard, my brain curdled. And not once, mind you. Oh, no, not Mrs. Hamlin's boy Piper. *Twice.*"

Muir said nothing. His hooded eyes were quite expressionless.

Piper couldn't leave it alone. 'I'm not yellow, Muir," he insisted. That, at least, he knew to be the truth. It wasn't quite clear to him why it was so important to convince Muir of it, but somehow it was. Muir's respect was something he wanted badly. "Let me put it this way. I'm like a second-rate pug that just isn't good enough or smart enough to mix it with the first-class boys. He's game; he keeps getting up there and getting his ears pinned back. But sooner or later, he starts to hear gongs in his head. Unless he's already too punchy to read the signs, he begins to get the idea that maybe he should take up some other line of business. So he hangs up his gloves and climbs down out of the ring. For keeps."

"I see," Muir said in his toneless voice. "But what if—life, say, climbs down out of the ring after him?"

"He ducks."

"Maybe he'll get in a corner where he can't duck—where he'll find out when it's too late that if he hadn't been so busy ducking, he need not have got backed into the corner at all," said Muir. "However, it's your life, Hamlin. Live it the way you want to."

Muir just didn't understand, Piper told himself. It was too bad. It would have been nice if he had.

HE FELL into step beside Muir. "Let's consider this problem from another angle. My angle," Muir said. "They reached the elevator, but Muir didn't jab the button at once.

"An enemy," he went on, "always has weaknesses. Locate them, and you can cripple him. The soft spot in the Bent Machine is the fact that Friday is election day, and the Stevens killing can be made a political issue. That's where we attack."

"This is murder," Piper reminded him. "Not war."

"The strategy is the same. To understand the tactics of war is to know politics. War is only politics carried to a point where force has to be brought into play. Halliday understands that. He wants to

make a name for himself out of this case."

Piper nodded. "They say he's getting ready to run for governor next term."

"In any case, Halliday and Bent and the rest of them are willing to pin this murder on the first man who comes along. You, probably. We can clock that move by turning this case into a political football and letting the voters in on what's being kicked around."

"Me again, no doubt," Piper said morosely.

"As you say." Muir nodded. "Friday's their end-zone, so to speak. The more we can crowd them back against their goal line, the more hurried and frantic their plays will have to be. They'll manufacture evidence if they need to, but they'll be clumsy, rushed. We've got to stir things up, keep them from getting set—"

Gloomily, Piper listened. He didn't much like the sound of that stirring things up business. The Machine had him lashed to the powder keg already, and Muir was talking about lighting the fuse.

"Don't forget," Muir was saying, "you're still their pet candidate for a hangman's knot. Considering your position on the opposition paper and whatever they think you might know and aren't telling.

"They'll overlook any evidence that doesn't point straight at you. And it's the things they withhold that we've got to keep hammering at. None of them for instance paid any attention to the gardenia when you brought it up. Or the photograph of the soldier that you saw on Tuesday."

"Diogenes," Piper murmured.

"We rammed him down their frightened throats," said Muir. He pressed the elevator button. "And Kennedy or Halliday interviewed the elevator man, Adam Lake. They didn't mention that, either."

The elevator door opened. Muir reached inside and pulled the operator out into the corridor. "I want to talk with you," he said.

Adam Lake was a frail, bleak little man with glassily vacuous eyes that, even at Muir's odd behavior, registered only mild surprise. He looked like a brittle shell out of which all the inner flesh had been drawn. Empty, desiccated.

"Are you—police?" he inquired timidly.

"Checking up," Muir nodded. "When you were questioned this morning, who did you say visited Stevens' office Monday night?"

"I've got work to do," Adam Lake whined. "I ain't got time—"

Muir shoved Piper through the open door. The elevator buzzers sounded like a nest of disturbed hornets. "Run that, will you?"

Piper glanced at the elevator's mechanism and prayed. He did something that he hoped would send the car down to the ground floor. It went up.

"This won't take a minute," Muir went on, after the heavy doors had closed on Piper's anguished face. "When did Miss Vern leave that night?"

Adam Lake confirmed Rhea's story that she had left at her accustomed time. Stevens had never gone down at all. At least, Adam hadn't seen him. Two people, excluding the charwoman, Mrs. O'Connor, had come up to Stevens' office.

The elevator dial above them was leaping about sporadically, and occasionally Hamlin's muffled howls came shouting down the shaft. "He's all right," Muir smiled. "Go on, Adam."

"There was a little man went up about five-thirty. Everybody else was gone from the fourth floor, so I knew he must be going to see Mr. Stevens. He talked some foreign kind of talk. I didn't bring him down. Maybe he used the service stairs."

Adam had never seen the little man before, but he remembered him pretty clearly. He wore a derby. His eyes was small and sort of shiny. Fur collar on his coat. It made him look like some kind of long-necked bird with a lot of feathers around its beak. That was all Adam could tell him.

"Who else came up?"

"A lady."

"For Stevens?"

Eyeing the erratic elevator-indicator nervously, Adam nodded; his expression said that somebody was going to catch hell for this and Adam knew who. "She's come up a couple times before. Always nights, and sometimes she goes out with him. Monday she didn't stay so very long. I rode her up and started up to the floor above—the fifth, that is—where old lady O'Connor was waiting with her stuff, no sooner got Mrs. O'Connor to this floor this redheaded lady was right there waiting to go down. Real scared she looked, too. About quarter to seven, must've been."

"Red hair?" Muir murmured.

"Like fire. Wasn't so young neither. Maybe thirty-five or so. But she sure was pretty."

"Mrs. O'Connor went into Stevens' office to clean it immediately after that?"

Adam shook his head. "She had the three others to do first. She got to 421 around seven, I guess."

"She didn't mention seeing Stevens?"

"No. She said he'd gone out without his hat."

"A derby?"

"Mr. Stevens never wore no derby, not that I ever saw."

The elevator door burst open, disgorging three passengers midway between fright and fury, who glared at the white-faced Piper with unmistakable loathing.

"Dammit, Muir," Piper bleated. "I've got passengers stranded on every floor. And I've been trying for five minutes to get these three off in the right place."

One of the women announced firmly that she would rather be shot from a cannon than enter the elevator again. Furthermore that nothing but hanging would do for Piper.

Muir gave her a dazzling smile. "Cheer up, madam. We're working on that now." Piper's white face went green.

Piper restored himself somewhat with three rum-gum-and-limes at the bar in the cocktail lounge on the main floor, while Muir gave him the gist of what he had learned from Adam Lake.

"Mrs. O'Connor sets the time of death pretty plainly."

Piper nodded. "Stevens must have been already dead and in the closet by seven, when she went into the office. She probably didn't bother with the closet at all. Sometime between five and seven. Maybe seeing him dead is what scared the redhead at quarter of. Maybe she killed him."

"Not too much time there."

Piper looked unhappy. "What made you think anybody visited Stevens Monday night? And why did you think the police had already questioned Adam Lake?"

Muir gave him a look. "Because Stevens was killed Monday night," he said in a tone of incredible patience. "And I thought we'd ruled out suicide. To your second, less imbecile question, the answer is not quite so blatantly obvious. The derby. The incredible derby, so utterly in place on the desk Tuesday morning. But not Stevens'. He didn't wear one. When you brought up the derby just now, it caused a definite riffle in the atmosphere. So the police knew about it. Knew or guessed who had worn it—because they had already questioned Adam Lake about Stevens' Monday night visitors." Muir opened his hands and spread them. "Q.E.D."

Piper finished the third drink. "That derby was there when Rhea Vern opened up Tuesday morning. The charwoman saw it Monday night—Stevens had a visitor." He closed his eyes. "So where does that get us?"

Glancing over Muir's shoulder, Piper saw Colonel Abbott come in through the street door with Angel Auden swinging on his arm. Angel was wearing a turquoise blue suit with a chocolate brown sailor and chocolate brown accessories. There was a run in only one of her sand-colored stockings. For Angel that was pretty good.

PIPER glanced up at his employer with renewed interest. Was Colonel Abbott Rhea Vern's unknown boy friend? He shared the trusteeship of Stevens' trust fund with her. And he'd zoomed up in this case from several other rabbit-holes as well. Piper studied the colonel's square-cut face—its thrusting jaw and prominent, arrogant nose. The man was a crusader, a veteran fighter in more senses than one—was he a killer too? Would he deliberately put an innocent man on the spot as, if he *had* murdered Stevens, the colonel had done by sending Piper to Stevens' office the next morning?

Scowling down at his itinerant employee, the colonel grumped, "Most expensive reporter I ever hired. Pretty penny you've cost me." Piper introduced him to Muir. The colonel beamed. "Remarkable book, sir. Most remarkable. Your *Trajectory of Light Artillery,* I mean. Pleasure to know you. And thanks for finding this idiot for me."

Angel smiled sweetly, and Piper knew she had turned up money somewhere. "The colonel wants to hire us, Muir. Isn't that lovely?"

Muir looked blank.

"Yes, this young lady has convinced me that Hamlin is innocent." Mighty white of you, Piper thought. Especially if you stabbed and throttled Stevens yourself. "And so I've decided to hire your services to aid in clearing him," the colonel went on. "The young lady suggested a fee of—ah, around a thousand—"

"Around a thousand, yes," said Angel, "but closer to fifteen hundred, remember, potato-pie?"

The colonel's winy cheeks got redder. "Of course, of course. Remarkable business sense your partner has, Mr. Muir."

"She's not my partner, and remarkable is putting it mildly. Voracious would be closer to it," said Muir.

Angel having completed her business stroke for the day announced her desire for a double Scotch sour. "Put it on the expense account, Muir," she said in an audible whisper.

Piper ordered a fourth rum-gum-and-lime, and pondered how Angel would collect if Colonel Abbott turned out to be guilty. To the distinctly questionable ethics of Muir and company working for both Rhea Vern and Colonel Abbott, he gave little thought. Rewards Inc. didn't have ethics, it had strategy.

The colonel displayed an interest in Muir's progress. "We've two suspects to check on. Both visited Stevens Monday night at approximately the time of the murder." Muir described the little man wearing the derby that was probably the one left in Stevens' office, and the frightened, red-headed woman.

Piper put his glass down slowly. "Say—I may know both of them. I should have remembered sooner." Sundown Jim was being awfully slow on the trigger. Possibly due to the four rum-gum-and-limes. "The little man could be a funny little foreigner I snapped on my beat Tuesday morning. Come to think of it, he was buying a derby, and he didn't want his picture taken.

"And the redhead may be the manicurist at the Barber of Seville. Fio's place. I think she told me once she knew Stevens." Piper frowned suddenly. "And what happened to those pictures I sent over to the office Tuesday morning, Colonel? That little guy's face is on one of those plates, now I think of it."

Muir gave him a sharp dig in the ribs, and said, "Halliday," out of the side of his mouth.

The d. a. came swinging importantly up to the end of the bar where they were all standing. Piper, seeing the cat that had swallowed the canary, wondered about Rhea Vern upstairs. Then the sleek tomcat noticed a second canary. Angel Auden. The shifting expression on his face denoted that the first was quite thoroughly digested and he was ready to pounce upon the second.

Angel looked blonde and cool, and her lips framed a half-contemptuous smile. Halliday wrenched his eyes away from her, and the cat-canary look vanished beneath her naked stare.

MUIR'S steely fingers tightened imperceptibly on the rim of his glass of soda and bitters. And his brain asked him derisively if he'd ever get over the swift flash of anger that came over him whenever a man looked at Angel that way. Looked at her, for that matter, at all. He'd almost hated Piper this morning in the Bentwood Arms apartment when Angel had lolled over him in that magnificently blatant manner she had. As if she didn't know what her body was, or how it affected men.

Angel was the only chink in Muir's almost flawless armor. To his quite unillusioned eyes, she was beautiful and dangerous, desirable and disastrous all at once—like some lazy, gorgeous animal, governed only by its instincts and an unshatterable confidence in its own powers which made it supremely indifferent to the interests and opinions of the human race.

Because Angel wasn't quite human. Not in the civilized sense. To love her was a constant, gnawing pain. To let her know that you loved her would be the most ruinous of follies. Which only proved that Muir, for all his insight, could not see what was in Angel's blue eyes when she looked at him, nor realize that it wasn't there for any other man in the world.

Thinking his thoughts, Muir sat there, statue-still, while Halliday babbled on, making Piper squirm with clumsy jokes about Piper's position in the Stevens case, jovially harping on the various suspects' need for a whole new set of alibis.

"For instance, Hamlin, how about yours—for Monday night?"

Well, thought Piper, here it was. This was what he had been worrying about ever since Muir had so neatly pinned down the time of the killing. "Offhand," he said, trying to sound blithely indifferent to this new calamity, "I don't seem to remember."

Colonel Abbott clapped a hand on Piper's shoulder. "Why, Hamlin, I'm offended deeply. Monday night, you had supper with me."

"That's right," Piper said, his gratitude considerably tempered by the knowledge that the colonel was providing himself with an alibi as well.

Halliday looked disappointed. With a final appreciative glance at Angel, he left them.

"I don't like him," Angel said flatly. "I'm so glad he doesn't have a lot of money. Because now I don't have to bother with him."

Muir, his acid mood somewhat softened, looked at her as a parent might look at an incorrigible but fascinating child. "I've got a job for you," he said. "It's about time you did some work."

Angel sighed.

Giving her a description of Diogenes, Muir told Angel she and Denny were to comb Preston until they'd found him. Angel finished her drink and stood up. The turquoise of her suit was now relieved by a generous dribble of whiskey sour down its front.

"I wouldn't work this hard for anybody but you, precious," she said to Piper. Then she turned to Colonel Abbott. "And I know you'd love to find me a taxi." Beaming, the colonel took her arm and they went out.

Muir turned suddenly on Piper. "Of course," he said slowly, "you didn't have supper with Abbott Monday night?"

"Of course," Piper assented bleakly. "I remembered a minute after Halliday asked me. I was at a movie. Alone."

Muir and Piper groaned together.

XI

11:10 A.M.

"WHAT," Muir asked in tones of distaste, "is that horrible object?" He waved his umbrella tip toward a hideous

statue in the center of Bent Square. In glistening black marble of untold cost, was a representation of Mayor Bent, seated and looking magnificently public-spirited; and another figure, with a gaunt, soulful face, standing behind him, resting his arm as if in benediction upon the mayor's hefty shoulder. "That's never"—Muir gulped and gestured at the second figure—"Abraham Lincoln?"

Piper grinned. "Honest Abe himself. Seems he hitched his mules here once on the way to Springfield. But how he came to put his blessing on the mighty Bent, I never have figured out." He whipped off his hat in a mock salute, and the sunlight fell across his yellow hair and boyish, slightly elfin face.

He should always look like that, Muir thought—solid, grinning, untroubled. Without those wary shadows in his eyes. Without that tautened pull to his mouth. This way, there was something inexpressibly untouched and sunny about him that was good to see. He must have looked like this before whatever it was that lay in his past had started eating at his heart.

"And," Muir resolved, "I'll make him look like that again if I have to kill him to do it."

Piper's grin faded before the frightening grimness of Muir's stare. He clapped his hat back on his head and said, "Fio's barber shop is just down the block."

Muir nodded and they started off.

Just a little west of the Barber of Seville, Hamlin darted suddenly to the rank of green and yellow cabs, and buttonholed one of the idling hackies.

"I'm looking for a driver I hired here Tuesday morning," he said. "Checker cab, I think."

The driver shrugged. "I wouldn't know him. This is a Yellow I'm driving."

Frustrated, Piper returned to Muir's side. "No dice," he muttered, shaking his head. "Pretty soon, I'll start wondering if I ever did take those pictures."

"Perhaps Abott has them already. Maybe he has a reason for not mentioning it."

Piper nursed the thought in silence, glad to know that Muir shared his own doubts about the colonel.

They reached Fio's place and turned in. Fio beamed on Piper lavishly and paternally. "See," he said with a magnificent gesture of his shears, "I tell you. This Stevens, he get it, just like I say. Is bad business to monkey with Mayor Bent."

Piper grunted. Fio didn't know the half of it. Nobody was trying to hang *him*. Piper asked about Libby, the manicurist.

Libby, it appeared, was on the sick list, but Fio was delighted to give Piper her address. He wrote it out for them on a slip of green paper:

Libby La Roche
78 South Merida

As Piper put the slip into his pocket, Muir reached for the phone on Fio's cigar counter and gave the Bentwood Arms number.

11:30 A.M.

SOUTH MERIDA was a drab and narrow street where rooming houses huddled together in silent misery, with shabby lawns thrown down before them like tattered door-mats. A noisy street-car line ran up the street to the shipyards six blocks north.

"Nice neighborhood," Piper said.

Piper didn't know the half of it. Merida Street was in the First Ward, securest of all Boss Bent's domains, his scabbily feudal buffer state. In the last election, out of a possible five hundred and fifty-six votes, the ballot tally had listed: *Bent,* 592—*Thompson,* 4; and Boss Bent had screamed bloody murder.

A few minutes after Piper and Muir had paid their taxi-driver and dismissed him, Lincoln Wegg came rolling up in the Rewards Inc. station wagon.

"You went to Police Headquarters this morning?"

Nodding, Wegg brushed a piece of lint off his lapel. "Nothing much there. I saw the gardenia. Same kind they sell in Bent's flower shop. I saw the case records, the knife—it was Stevens' own paper-knife. They showed me that snapshot of the doughboy, too. It didn't tell me a thing."

Muir nodded. "Kennedy have a red-headed woman brought in?"

"Not while I was there."

Muir turned and mounted the porch. "Kennedy's slipping. Maybe we'll beat him to it for once. Let's go in."

"That doesn't sound like Kennedy," Piper said with a shake of his head. The place didn't feel right. Near the door was a faded sign: *Furnished Rooms—Light Housekeeping.* Piper's glance slid sideways, disliking the four-story clapboard house. The bleak, staring windows made him feel cold again. They looked like Adam Lake's eyes.

In the tiny vestibule, Muir rang the door buzzer three times as the mail-slot placard directed. *La Roche, ring* 3. There was no answer. He waited a bit, then tried again. Getting impatient, he rang the bell marked *Superintendent* and soon a heavy-set Irish woman opened the door.

"Miss La Roche?"

"Not home." The woman tried to close the door against Muir's swiftly out-thrust boot. "She's not been home," the woman insisted. "You'd not be cops?"

"If Miss La Roche hasn't committed any crime there's nothing for her to be afraid of," Muir said firmly. "Where is she?"

"Maybe I could take a message. Why is it you're wanting her?"

"I'd like to talk to her about—a murder," Muir said pleasantly. He was very casual about it.

The landlady's face went white, and she goggled helplessly for a minute. Then, "She's gone to Chicago," she said.

Muir's hooded eyes displayed quick interest. "When?"

"I'd not be knowing." The woman backed away a little, permitting the three men to enter the inner hall. "She came home Monday night real late. The next morning I found her bed had not been touched at all. Tuesday night I got a special delivery from her from Chicago, asking me to forward her clothes. I'll get you the letter and you can see for yourself."

The Irishwoman bustled down the dim hall, the floorboards creaking under her heavy tread. She came back and handed Muir a letter, neatly typed, on yellow paper.

Piper read it over Muir's shoulder.

Dear Mrs. Lafferty:

I'm sorry to trouble you but I had to leave for Chicago on very short notice. I'm not sure how long I must stay, so as soon as you receive this, will you please put my loose things in a package and send them to the Morrison Hotel here.

Enclosed is five dollars. I've already packed some few things, so you can store my trunk in the basement until I can have it picked up.

Libby La Roche.

"Isn't the Morrison pretty expensive?" Piper demanded. "For a manicurist?"

Wegg blinked solemnly beneath infolded lids. "That depends," he said, taking the letter from Muir's hands.

The landlady, at Muir's request, took them upstairs to a room in the front of the house. In the hall, the wallpaper was damp-streaked and faded. Stale fumes of old cooking hung in the air like rags of fog. The landlady unlocked Libby La Roche's door.

The room was neat and clean and fairly large. In one corner stood a studio bed discreetly veiled with an India print. The kitchen-closet opposite was draped with a hanging of the same material; and the enameled washbowl was half hidden by a vaguely French screen. As far as Piper could see, Libby La Roche was not merely respectable. She had the kind of mind that

believed that objects which served the human body—beds, washbowls, and cooking utensils—should be kept genteelly out of sight.

Meanwhile, Muir was showing deep interest in the large, theatrical-type trunk that stood against the wall. Lincoln Wegg went to the window, raised the shades, and ran his thumb around the sashwork.

Mrs. Lafferty sniffed from the hall. "'Tis not a speck of dust you'll be finding here. I keep my rooms spotless—"

Muir left the trunk to close the door in her face, then moved around the room with the swift, inclusive efficiency of a well-run vacuum cleaner.

He inspected the clothes closet. He glanced under the bed. He ran deft fingers through the contents of each of the bureau drawers. He spent a longer time looking over the scattered bills and letters in the wobble-legged, pseudo-mahogany escritoire. Most of what he found there were press clippings from the days when Libby La Roche had been a not too successful torch singer. "The entertainment was rounded out by Klaus and Velie, ballroomologists, Tracy's Society Poodles, and Miss Libby La Roche, a singer of exotic songs," was the average notice she got. Once she was listed before the dancers—it must have been a great triumph.

"Where would a woman like Libby La Roche hide personal things she wouldn't want the landlady to see when she came in to clean?" Muir inquired.

"The trunk, if there was anything she wanted to keep locked up," Piper suggested.

Muir shook his head. "Not if she was used to rooming houses, and as an entertainer she must have been."

"In the dresser?"

"Nothing there."

"All right, coach—where?"

Muir sighed. "I wish I could guess. Libby La Roche must have had some sort of reason for leaving Preston so fast. Perhaps she knew something about Stevens that made her think the murderer might be after her too. Maybe she knew who killed him. Even saw him. She didn't take time to pack much. Most of her stuff still seems to be here. Maybe she forgot something that she had hidden away—something she was too upset to remember."

"Hey," said Piper. "You never looked under the paper linings in those drawers. That's something a landlady never touches. Kind of a blind spot, I guess—once they're in there, they stay."

"Nice try, little man," said Muir, sliding long fingers swiftly along the bottoms of the drawers. "Got it!" He waved two letters in the air. Glancing through them quickly, he tossed them to Piper.

Piper glanced at William Stevens' letterhead, then scanned the prim, carefully formed handwriting.

Dear Libby:

Please accept the check with my best wishes. We'll discuss it Friday at supper.

W. S.

There wasn't any date on that one. The second had been written on the fifth of May—three days before the night of the murder.

Dear L. H.:

The details have been arranged at long last. Be in my office Monday evening at six-fifteen. We'll be in a position then to face him with the proof. He'll either admit it publicly, or we'll expose the impostor.

W. S.

Piper's eyes looked pleased. "That's certainly something," he said. "Maybe it was through Libby that Stevens got his dope on Bent's organization. Or maybe she's been working with Diogenes, as a go-between. He's a party man; he might not think it was so healthy to be seen running in and out of Stevens' office."

"Possibly. But I'd rather know who

wrote and sent that special delivery letter to Mrs. Mother Machree Lafferty. Because of course, Libby La Roche never did."

"Didn't she?"

"Tell him, Wegg," Muir said patiently.

Wegg took a moment more to finish polishing his already speckless glasses. "If she, Miss La Roche, was so frightened that she rushed out of town without bothering to take most of her possessions with her, without even stopping to recover those two notes from Mr. Stevens, then when did she find time to pack her trunk?"

Piper nodded. "But if she isn't in Chicago—where is she?" His voice trailed off sickly as his eyes followed Muir's to the trunk. So that was what his itch had been trying to tell him ever since they'd entered the house. He wanted very much not to look. He didn't succeed.

"Open it, Wegg," Muir said quietly.

Wegg knelt beside the trunk and released the catch-lock with a thin instrument shaped like a spoon. Piper leaned forward, nerves jittering like humming birds. Wegg threw back the top and Piper grinned foolishly. "Clothes," he sighed.

"Not exactly," Wegg said, bending lower over the trunk. An armful of silk things fluttered to the floor.

Piper stepped forward in spite of himself. Somebody threw a rock and the hummingbirds in his chest swooped and dipped in panicky, flittering flight.

Inside the trunk was something tightly wrapped in a plain white sheet. But one corner was loose and a strand of red hair —red as fire—trailed over the naked whiteness.

XII

11:50 A.M.

GAVIN MUIR'S probing eyes never flickered. "Take it, Wegg," was all that he said.

Wegg nodded and wordlessly left the room. Piper listened to the whisper of his steps going along the hall, down the stairs. Only then could he wrench his staring eyes from Libby La Roche's shrouded; doubled-over corpse.

Libby had been such a bright, cheerful woman, always joking and smiling. And now somebody had killed her, wrapped her up in a sheet and stuffed her body into a trunk. The smiling redhead was dead. Dead as a stone, or a lightning-blasted tree, or the ice-cold weight that had settled in the pit of Piper's belly.

Then panic suddenly beset him. "I never said her body was in there—I never told you to look in the trunk—"

Muir straightened, gripped Piper's lapels with one hand and slapped him across the face with the other. "I never had to do that to a man before," he said calmly, letting Piper go.

"I'm sorry, Muir." He raised his palm to his stinging cheek. "I'm going a little nuts I guess. My mind is beginning to work the way *theirs* do—trying to think what construction they'll put on everything that happens—racing to get there first."

"Take it easy, Hamlin," Muir advised him. "So you were here when we found the body and you think Halliday'll try to make something out of that. All right. So was I—so was Wegg—" Exasperation edged his tone, and Piper knew he was acting like a child.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Muir sat down in the big armchair, lit a cigarette and, letting his head fall back, closed his eyes. He stayed like that, while Piper paced the room restlessly, until Wegg came back, carrying a flat black case. He thrust a Leica, equipped with a flash synchronizer into Piper's hands. "Get to work," he said.

At automatic obedience, Piper set the aperture and shutter speed. He no longer saw the body in the trunk. What he saw now were shots, angles, finished glossies. It was restfully impersonal. He went to work. He shot the trunk from three or four different angles; then got busy on the

dresser, the studio bed, the kitchen corner, until everything in the room had been picked up by the prying lens and recorded on film.

By the time he was through, Wegg was making his report to Muir. "No fingerprints on the body. Plenty on the trunk. They could be anybody's—most likely hers. Doesn't seem to have been much of a struggle. Probably a man did it. Strangled her—with his hands."

"When?"

Wegg washed the Van Ledden thermometer in the basin, talked over his shoulder. "I'll have to look at the stomach before I can tell you that. Maybe thirty-five, forty hours ago. Monday night would be a close guess."

"Bruises?"

"None." Wegg straightened and let his eyes, bright behind the thick-lensed glasses, run around the room. "Must've been getting ready for bed. Looks as if she'd just undressed and put on a kimono to receive her caller. Then—"

"Aren't you going to call the police?" Piper demanded. "They'll be itching to give me a good going over. This is just about all they need."

"No police," Muir said lazily. "Too much red tape. Too much—grief."

"But Mrs. Lafferty. How—"

"I'll take care of that. Give Wegg a lift with the trunk down to the station wagon. When you're through, Hamlin, check on those pictures. Get in touch with the cab people—find that driver."

12:30 P.M.

PROBABLY nothing about the Stevens case would have been much different if Piper had carried out Muir's instructions to the letter and on the jump. But because he didn't, he was introduced to one of Preston's most distinctive institutions.

He was on his way to the Checker Cab outfit's main stand, when, passing a corner tavern, he reflected that maybe a drink would steady his wobbly nerves. Well, no, on mature consideration, one drink wouldn't. But six or seven might. He went into the tavern and had a shot of rye.

After the third or fourth, he began thinking about Rhea Vern. Next to Colonel Abbott, she was Piper's pet suspect. There was certainly something funny about her.

Something she was hiding. Something she was afraid of. There was that mysterious boy friend, and her legacy from Stevens. Maybe she'd got the idea that Libby La Roche was interfering in her plans. Or maybe she really was in love with Stevens and had killed them both out of jealousy. Nope, that didn't include the unknown Romeo; and it didn't make any sense anyhow.

But then what in this crazy, Piper reflected with alcoholic philosophy, case did? . . . Pink gardenias. One derby hat too many. An owlish man named Wegg looking for a wife who'd been missing for seven years and whom he'd never liked much anyway. A fat man who shouted about "anarchists" and had a city in his pocket. A fighting man handing out gratuitous alibis to the needy. A corpse in a trunk and one in a closet. It all went round and round.

Piper's brain went round and round too, and in its circuit eventually arrived back at Rhea Vern. Maybe he'd better have a little talk with her, ask a few questions himself. Piper warmed to the idea. And the next thing he knew he was in the phone-booth dialing the number of Stevens' office.

Rhea had a nice voice. Warm and friendly.

"You sound hungry," Piper told her.

"I guess maybe I am," Rhea answered.

"I've got a lot of more important things to attend to," he said gravely, "but you know what—? I'm going to drop everything and buy you lunch."

"Thanks too much," Rhea snapped. After all, a girl likes to feel that she's more important than anything else, even to a co-

suspect in a murder case. "Are you sure you really can spare the time?"

Her sarcasm was wasted on Piper. "Be right over," he said, and hung up, beaming foolishly at the mouthpiece.

After only two more ryes, Piper was in a cab, driving west to the Lakeside Building, his earlier purpose forgotten. He had hardly gone a block, however, when he suddenly caught a glimpse of the round, lantern-nosed Diogenes eastward bound in a passing cab.

Piper shot forward in his seat. "Turn around and catch that Yellow!" he yelped to the driver. "And step on it. Twenty dollars if you make it."

The cab's impossible U-turn threw him back against the cushions. He righted himself and kept his eyes glued to the windshield. Diogenes' cab cut in ahead of a street-car. A truck swerved in from the side street, and Diogenes' cab drew ahead.

Piper shouted curses. "Pass him, you goon. Pass the trolley to the left." The driver muttered something about the law; and Piper was majestic in his defiance of man-made legislation. "Thirty bucks if you catch him."

The driver swerved around the wrong side of the streetcar. Then brakes screamed and Piper shot forward to crack his head against the dividing window as a second, westbound streetcar loomed up directly ahead.

THEN, out of nowhere, all the cops in Preston were swarming into the cab, blowing their whistles and shouting. Piper crawled back on the seat, and wilted. He'd forgotten about Preston's mammoth police force. About half the population, deserving party-members all, were policemen. Since what crime there was was scrupulously carried on by direct wire from the City Hall, this huge army of cops had little or nothing to do.

The cab-driver was probably somebody's brother. Or maybe he'd voted the straight party ticket and had a badge to show for it. Anyhow, the entire majesty of the law converged upon Piper.

"I was chasing a man who's wanted in the Stevens murder case," he bleated, even as he reflected that if he'd been a cop, he probably wouldn't have believed it either.

"Remind me to tell the sergeant about it," one of the cops said.

"No—look—I can't let him get away—" Piper sprang from the seat and attempted a straight line-buck through the wall of blue uniforms. Nine rubber truncheons rose in the air and descended with jubilant energy. Piper took most of them on the top of his skull. Diogenes' lantern swelled with incredible rapidity and exploded in his face. He floated gently down through blackness.

Piper awoke by degrees, each a separate notch of agonized awareness. First there was sound, then light, then vision—each new phase accompanied by a harsh and deafening clanging of a huge bronze gong located in the exact center of his head.

He was lying on a comfortable daybed effect with soft, cretonne pillows cushioning his ringing cranium. The walls were papered in delicate pastel shades. There were dimity curtains at the windows, and a hand-needled Beidermeier chair in one corner of the room. Only the bars at the door and windows made it seem even faintly possible that this was a cell.

The turnkey smiled in upon him from the door. "You're awake I see," he said amicably. "You don't have to stay in the cell unless you want to. Most everybody else is in the club."

"The club?" Piper repeated numbly.

The turnkey nodded. "The club." He extended his palm.

"What's that for?"

"My tip, Mister. Usually I get one for showing the fellers up. We had to *carry* you." It was a definite reproach.

This was no time to be a piker, Piper could see. He fumbled in his wallet and brought out a fiver.

The Turnkey accepted it and departed

like a well-trained bellhop, leaving the cell door wide open.

Piper closed his eyes and stood absolutely still. He counted, slowly, to one hundred. This was like walking on balloons. When he opened his eyes, nothing had changed. Radio music came from somewhere, dulcet strains that added to the total dreamlike impression.

Groggily, Piper left his cell and followed the music. He arrived eventually at a large, sunny room which looked like a country club lounge. It was crowded with men, smoke, and sound. There was a bar at the far end; several games of bridge were in progress; so was a large poker session.

Pressing his hands to his head, Piper ploughed over to the bar. "What'll it be, bud?" said the bartender, a city cop with a white apron incongruously tied around his middle.

"I," Piper informed him, "am practically unborn. What is all this?" He gulped the rye and indicated that he could use another.

"You're in jail, brother," the bartender beamed, flashing a denture that made Fort Knox look like the poor-box in a Bowery mission. "Just like all the rest of the guys. We got a big crowd this year."

"You mean you have to get arrested to come here?"

The bartender nodded and went to answer a summons from the other end of the bar. Piper clung to the edge of the bar with both hands.

This dream world was, as most dream worlds are, populated with one or two people he could recognize. For instance, over there near the window was the cab-driver he'd given his plates to that Tuesday morning so many aeons back. Experimentally, Piper wafted over to where the cabbie was standing.

"Hello," he said.

The cabbie looked up calmly. "Hiya. Say—don't I remember you? Tuesday morning—you gave me a bundle to deliver."

"That's right," said Piper solemnly, admiring the lifelikeness of his dream. "What happened to it?"

"I didn't get a chanct to deliver it yet," the cabbie said. "I got into a fight with a cop and they hauled me in. But your package is okay. I got it tucked away in the back seat."

Piper had an inspiration. He reached out suddenly and grabbed the cabby's arm. It was skinny, but it was solid flesh and bone. The cabby stared. Piper let go of his arm and gathered a fold of the flesh around his own wrist between his fingers and pinched hard. It hurt. He stared at the cabby disbelievingly.

"Are you nuts?" the cabby inquired.

"Probably," said Piper. "But let's take it slow. I'm here —you're here. But just exactly where is *here?*"

"The Riviera," the cabby told him.

"All right. I'm nuts. I thought we were in Preston."

"This *is* Preston. This is the Preston jail," the cabby said.

"And all these men are under arrest?"

"Sure. Jail always gets crowded in Preston during election week. They put the overflow up here. Most of these birds here right now are respectable business guys that Bent knows is going to vote for Abbott. So whenever he gets a chanct, he picks 'em up on some technicality. You know, like speeding or not sprinkling their lawns or busting some ordinance. When it gets full downstairs, they start sendin' 'em up here. Like you and me, 'cause we was picked up late."

"When it isn't election time, what is this—Riviera?"

"It's a jail too. But it's for friends of the big-shots that Kennedy just can't get out of arrestin'."

Piper took a long time to digest this. Before coming to Preston he would have said it couldn't be true. But now it seemed quite in the picture. "Let's get back to that package," he said. "Where's your cab?"

"In the police garage. We'll get the stuff back after election when they turn us loose. Don't worry."

"No," said Piper dully. "I'll try not to."

3 P.M.

THE Preston National Bank opposite the post office was a handsome, substantial-looking building, and like all the other institutions in the city worth bothering about, it was manned and owned by reliable organization men.

Angel, approaching it in the wake of the little man in the frowzy fur collar and shiny new derby, eyed it with respect. She could smell money in its every brick. But she sternly curbed whatever larcénous projects her brain had leaped to almost by instinct and kept her attention riveted on the little man, whom she'd spotted quite by accident as he'd parked his car and crossed the pavement directly in front of her.

He *had* to be Piper's camera-shy little foreigner. Not even a city as large and as full of all sorts of oddments as Preston was could contain two such specimens.

Mr. Sienciewicz entered the bank. Angel, resplendent in a short jacket of string-colored Mongolian lamb and a cap of champagne colored velvet set on top of her dazzling hair, followed him.

The doorman eyed her approvingly. And the guard inside fussed around her goggle eyed as she pretended to struggle with a deposit slip while waiting for Mr. Sienciewicz to conclude a long and elaborate transaction at one of the windows.

As soon as he'd gone, Angel approached the teller and gave him the one-two smile. If she hadn't been so intent on learning Mr. Scienciewicz's name and identity, she would have known that the straw-colored youth with the watery eyes and invisible chin could never stand up under the full incandescence of that smile.

It wilted him completely and while Angel, tapping her foot, stood and glared at him, all he could do was to cling moistly to the bars of his cage and breathe hard.

In exasperation, Angel turned to the portly executive type who was hovering vaguely in the immediate neighborhood.

"Look," she said. "All I did was ask that—*him* a comparatively simple question. And then he went into that epileptic stroke or whatever it is."

"You can hardly blame the poor boy, now can you?" inquired the executive type, with incomparable gallantry. "I'm Mr. Ebbetts. Perhaps I can help you."

These Preston men just couldn't take it, Angel reflected. Now here was Mr. Ebbets getting all misty-eyed and wolverine, too. "I simply wanted to find out the name of the last man he waited on," Angel said firmly, fixing Mr. Ebbetts with her most businesslike eye.

Mr. Ebbetts dragged himself from the Elysian Fields wherein his fancies were straying. "Er, yes—" he said, "Of course." He addressed the teller firmly. "Answer the lady's question."

"Sienciewicz," said the teller, feebly.

"Now he's being downright insulting," Angel said, her blue eyes glinting.

"No, no—dear lady, I assure you," Mr. Ebbetts said quickly. "We do have a client with such a name. And it's entirely possible—"

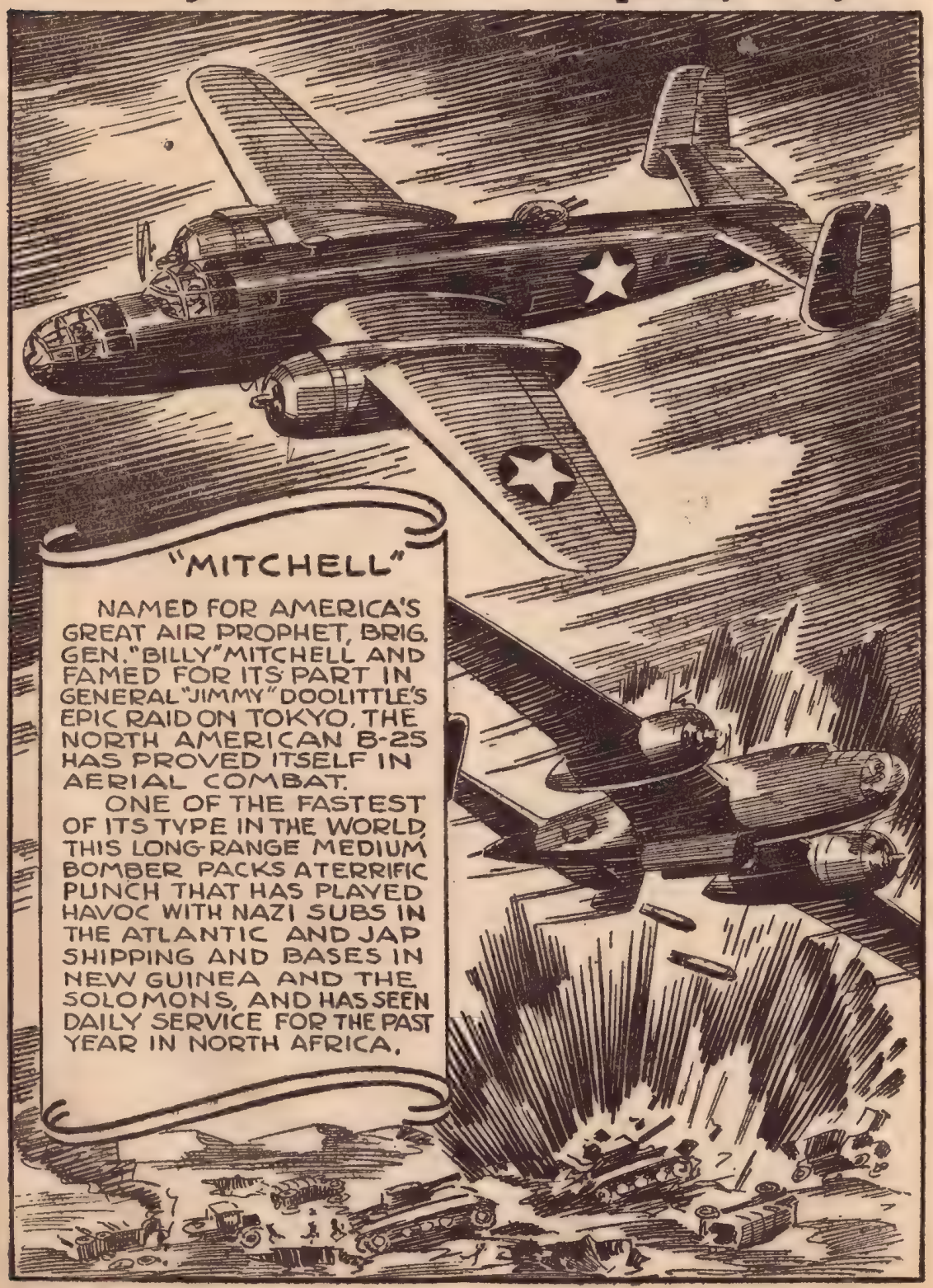
Angel permitted the voltage to fly recklessly, let the bodies fall where they would. She'd found out what she wanted to know.

She decided she'd file Mr. Ebbetts away for future reference, too. You never could tell when a banker might come in handy. She permitted Mr. Ebbetts to cling to her fingers for a full three seconds. He escorted her to the ornate bronze doors and by the time they had reached them, Mr. Ebbetts had somehow come into possession of her full name and the number of the Bentwood Arms apartment.

(*Part III in the next* SHORT STORIES)

Wings for Victory

BY Jim Kelly


"MITCHELL"
NAMED FOR AMERICA'S GREAT AIR PROPHET, BRIG. GEN. "BILLY" MITCHELL AND FAMED FOR ITS PART IN GENERAL "JIMMY" DOOLITTLE'S EPIC RAID ON TOKYO, THE NORTH AMERICAN B-25 HAS PROVED ITSELF IN AERIAL COMBAT.
ONE OF THE FASTEST OF ITS TYPE IN THE WORLD, THIS LONG-RANGE MEDIUM BOMBER PACKS A TERRIFIC PUNCH THAT HAS PLAYED HAVOC WITH NAZI SUBS IN THE ATLANTIC AND JAP SHIPPING AND BASES IN NEW GUINEA AND THE SOLOMONS, AND HAS SEEN DAILY SERVICE FOR THE PAST YEAR IN NORTH AFRICA.

It Was the Sheriff's Opinion That an Old Time Bad Man Would Have His Pants Shot Off in a Fight With Modern Gunmen

GUN SPEED

By SAM H. NICKELS

Author of "One for the Firing Squad," etc.

DRIVEN by the howling wind, flinty sleet rattled against the windows of Sheriff Bronson's adobe office like a hail of birdshot as he pawed disgustedly through the drawers of his spur-scarred desk. Snow and more sleet swirled through the crack beneath the door and powdered the floor almost to the glowing stove, but he went lazily on with his job of cleaning out piles of old papers, long-forgotten want bills and rubbish of every kind.

"I don't reckon this durned desk ever had a cleanin' out before," he grumbled. "I've found reward notices here for outlaws that has most likely been dead for twenty years. Here is one that I'd bet is closer to forty years old."

Scowling, he leaned back and read:

$1,000 REWARD
DEAD OR ALIVE

One thousand dollars in cash will be paid for the body of the Mogollon Kid. Age about twenty or twenty-one. Occupation, cowboy, but he is a gunman from choice. Handle this man with care. He is dangerous. Don't try to cross guns with him. You wouldn't have a chance. He is lightning fast. Take him alive if you can, but if you can't just get him. Bring body or proof of his death to the sheriff of Chupadero and receive reward.

Sheriff Bronson grunted and pawed thoughtfully at his drooping mustache. He listened for a moment to the roaring blizzard that shook the building and drove fine particles of snow and sleet through the tiny

cracks around the windows. He finally laid the old want bill on his desk and put his hat on top of it to keep it from blowing to the floor.

"Reckon I'll tack that up for a joke," he muttered. "I wonder if that Mogollon Kid or any of them other old-time gun fighters would've stood any chance against the outlaws we've got now? I reckon not. Their old single-action thumb-busters wouldn't throw lead like these new tommy-guns and automatics. One of these modern gangsters would have shot that Mogollon Kid before he knowed what hit him."

Bronson's chair scraped back noisily and he heaved himself to his feet. Picking up the reward notice, he crossed the room and tacked it on the wall behind the stove where loafers who came into his office would see it.

"I reckon that'll give somebody a laugh," he chuckled as he slouched back and seated himself at his desk. "I wonder what else I'm liable to find here?"

In the next drawer, he found a broken spur, several conchas, a harness punch and more papers. Near the bottom of the drawer, he found an old powder flask, some saddle strings and a pair of old-time cap-and-ball Remington revolvers. They were .44s, and a glance at their heavy cylinders showed that both old weapons were fully loaded. Corroded caps were still in place on every nipple, and blunt-nosed bullets could be seen in every chamber.

Smiling sarcastically, the sheriff laid the two old Remingtons on his desk and placed his own sleek .44 Special Smith and Wesson beside them.

"Some difference," he chuckled. "Them old cannons wouldn't have a look-in against that gun of mine. An' they'd have less chance against an automatic or a tommy-gun. I think I'll hang them up, too. The boys would like to look at 'em. I'll shoot the loads out of 'em tomorrow, if they'll still shoot."

Bronson dug deeper in the drawer and hauled out a double-holstered gunbelt that had been scarred and warped with long use. He slid the two old weapons into the swivel holsters and again rose to his feet. When he had hung the gun-laden belt upon a nail near the old want notice, he went back and pulled out yet another drawer.

The blizzard had increased in fury, and the whistling wind eddied down the stovepipe, filling the room with smoke and soot. The windows rattled noisily under the impact of the blast, and a piece of loose tin began slapping somewhere back toward the jail. Dry snow came under the door and swirled clear across the room as another gust shook the building.

It was rapidly getting dark, but when the sheriff looked at his big silver watch, he saw that it was only a few minutes past three. He muttered a remark and began putting more wood in the stove.

"This is goin' to be an awful night," he growled. "I'd hate like blazes to be called out on a case on such a night. I—"

As a sudden muffled thud sounded from outside, the sheriff came erect and darted a look across the room. There came a knock at the door, then it was hurled open and a man staggered inside. He grabbed the door and tried weakly to close it, but the wind threw him against the wall and sent snow and loose papers flying all over the room. The sheriff rushed to help, and he managed to fasten the heavy door in spite of a driving gust which threatened to tear it from its hinges.

"Well," Bronson shouted, glaring around, "where did you blow from? What's happened? Must be somethin' pressin' to bring you here in a storm like this. What is it?"

The man shook his head and stumbled feebly toward the stove. "It ain't nothin'," he said. "I come to see if you wouldn't let me sleep in your jail tonight. I'm broke an' I got nowhere to go."

As he turned and the sheriff got a better look at him, he saw that his visitor was a gray-haired old man. His ragged clothes

had been patched in many places, and his toes could be seen through cracks in his wet shoes. His straggly beard was damp with melted snow, and he shivered as he held his thin, blue-veined hands close to the stove. He smiled and coughed as he caught the sheriff staring at him.

"I ain't as stout as I used to be," he said wearily. "I can't stand bein' out in this kind of weather no more."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed and he scowled pityingly. "Old-timer," he said, "have you had any dinner?"

THE old bum shook his head and then grinned apologetically. He started to reply, but a spasm of coughing struck him and he slumped down in a chair. As he leaned back and began gasping for breath, the sheriff muttered an oath and rushed to some shelves on the wall near his desk. He grabbed a bottle of whiskey and hurried back to the stove.

"Here, old-timer," he grunted. "Hop this down you. You've blamed near got pneumonia."

The old man nodded his thanks and raised the bottle to his lips. He took a long drink, then cleared his throat and grinned gamely.

"That sure hits the spot," he said hoarsely. "I better not take too much on an empty stomach. I haven't eaten a bite since yesterday."

"What!" Bronson almost yelled. "You set there an' thaw yoreself out till I get back. Old-timer, I'm fillin' you up."

Muttering oaths, the sheriff hurried through the back door into the musty corridor that led past a row of steel-barred cells to the jailer's quarters. He was back in a few minutes with a huge tray of food and a pot of lukewarm coffee that had been left from dinner. He put the coffee on the stove and set the tray on a box which he dragged from a corner.

"Start wadin' into that," he ordered harshly. "That coffee'll get hot in a few minutes."

As Bronson stooped and shoved a chunk of piñon into the stove, the old man picked up a biscuit and a piece of fried ham and began eating. For a while, he wolfed down the coarse food as if starved. But at last, he began to eat slower. He had just reached for more ham and bread when the sheriff filled the tin cup beside him with steaming coffee.

The old man ate silently for a long while. At last, he leaned back in his chair and began contentedly sipping his third cup of coffee. As he did so, his faded blue eyes strayed to the pair of old Remingtons behind the stove. He rose and looked at them closer. He slipped one of the long-barreled weapons from its holster and balanced it for a moment in his thin hand. He smiled quietly and glanced at the yellowed reward notice as he shoved the big gun back into its holster.

"Ever hear of that Mogollon Kid?" the sheriff asked, watching him.

The old man nodded and sat down. "Yeah, I've heard of him," he said hoarsely. "Pity he wasn't killed off years ago.

They sent him up to the 'big house' for life, but he escaped on them. I reckon the law has done forgot about him. Funny you'd have that reward notice tacked up after all these years."

The sheriff chuckled. He then explained how he had found it and the old cap-and-ball Remingtons stored away and forgotten in the bottom drawers of his battered desk.

"Them guns wouldn't stand a ghost of a show against the guns we have now," he said. "They would be too slow. An automatic would shoot a dozen times while one of them old cannons was shootin' once. That Mogollon Kid would've had his pants shot off before he could've cleared leather with a long-barreled gun like one of them."

The old bum took a thoughtful sip of coffee and shook his head. "I ain't so sure of that," he said. "They say the Kid was plenty fast, an' a gun is as fast as the man behind it. Yes, an' one slug from

a cap-an'-ball can kill just as quick as a bullet from a forty-five automatic."

THE sheriff smiled dryly and tilted back his chair. He started to reply, but before he could speak, the old-fashioned telephone jangled on the back of his desk. The front legs of his chair banged to the floor and he glared around just as the phone rang again.

"Somethin's happened," he grumbled, heaving himself to his feet. "I can tell by the way that thing rings. I hope I ain't bein' called out in this blizzard."

Still muttering, he crossed the room as the bell jangled again. Scowling, he snatched the receiver from the hook.

"Hello!" he snapped. "Hello! Yes, this is—what! What's that? You don't know if —I'm comin' on the run!"

He slammed the receiver back on the hook and grabbed a sheepskin coat from a nail behind his desk. Without a glance at the old man who was staring questioningly, he rushed through the back door. He was back in a couple of minutes with an automatic shotgun and a few articles he had snatched up in his room at the end of the corridor.

"Here," he barked, tossing the old man a flannel shirt and a pair of heavy wool socks. "Put them on. They'll keep you warmer. If I don't get back, find you a bunk in one of them cells back there. Somethin's wrong at the bank. Operator says their phone keeps buzzin' like a receiver had been knocked off the hook. She can't get an answer. Thinks it's a robbery on. Keep the fire goin'."

The sheriff grabbed a box of buckshot shells from a shelf and tore it open as he talked. Working swiftly, he filled the magazine of his shotgun and snapped one shell into the barrel.

"That could hardly be a robbery," the old man said, staring. "Not on a day like this."

"Best time in the world for one," the sheriff shot back. "Be nobody on the street. Thieves could make their getaway without bein' seen by a soul except the people they robbed."

Bronson crammed the last of the shells into his pocket and buttoned his coat. Pulling his fur cap tight on his head, he crossed the room and jerked open the door. Snow swirled into the room and papers flew in every direction as he stepped outside and dragged the door shut behind him. Gripping his shotgun, he hunched over against the driving wind and rushed away into the driving storm.

Stumbling, often floundering into deep drifts, he cut across vacant lots in the direction of the bank. He tried to run, but the snow drove into his eyes, blinding him.

He quickly reached the deserted street and turned to the right. He was almost to the squatty, one-storied bank building when the muffled bark of a gun sent him racing forward. As he passed the nearest window he caught a glimpse of a pair of masked men through the snow-dimmed glass, and sped on to the door.

But as he reached to turn the latch he failed to see a muffled figure that appeared in the swirling snow behind him. He had just thrown the safety off his shotgun and was about to hurl open the door when a clubbed gun hit him a terrific blow across the back of the head and he slumped down on the step.

Dazed and helpless, but not entirely knocked out he felt himself being dragged inside the building. He could feel the warmer air on his face, and heard an angry growl of voices around him. His hands were hurriedly lashed together behind him, and he felt himself being dragged along the floor. Ears ringing and lights dancing before his eyes, he shook his head again. He struggled weakly to free his hands, and tried to rise on one elbow.

"Take it easy, sweetheart," came a sneering voice beside him. "You ain't goin' no place yet. Get too ambitious, an' you'll get another tap on the head."

The sheriff looked up and found a

masked man standing over him with a short-barreled Luger gripped ready in one hand. He was a slender, wiry-built hombre, and his beady, black eyes gleamed mockingly through holes in his mask.

"Aw, go on an' bump him off, Slim," came a snarling voice from a short distance away. "He's a sheriff, an' we'll have to croak him anyway."

"Nix! Not yet," the wiry bandit snapped back. "We may need him for a shield in the get-away. If we don't, we can bump him then. Close them window blinds an' get to work on that safe. Wait! Look at that phone. It's off the hook."

SNARLING an oath, the slender hombre sprang past the sheriff to a desk where the telephone receiver was dangling by its cord. He snatched it up and jabbed it angrily to his ear.

"Hello," he called sharply. "Hello. Oh, hello, Central. That you? Yes, I must've knocked the receiver off in opening a book. Was busy and didn't notice it. No. Oh, no. Nothin's wrong. Thoughtful of you to call the sheriff. He just got here, but we didn't need him. We're just closing up. Good-bye."

Chuckling wickedly, he hung up the receiver and turned toward a gray-haired old man who sat roped to a chair behind him. He snarled an oath and struck him viciously across the face.

"You'll be the guy that knocked that phone off the hook," he said, glaring. "Figured it'd bring help, did you? I ought to go ahead an' croak you!"

Barking orders right and left, the slender hombre moved over closer to the big old-fashioned safe which one of the bank employees had slammed and locked as the bandits entered the building. The blinds were swiftly pulled down at all of the windows and the key turned in the lock on the door. To the chance person who might pass upon the snow-filled street, the place would look as if it had been closed for the day.

As the sheriff lifted his head for a wary look around him, he saw that there were five of the outlaws. Two were already at work on the safe, and one, a stocky, bull-necked man, crouched on guard beside the front door. All were heavily armed with automatics, and the man at the door clutched a wicked looking tommy-gun.

The few bank employees sat in terrified silence at desks about the room. One, probably the man who had managed to close the safe, lay sprawled lifeless upon the floor.

In spite of the danger of being shot, the sheriff wrenched and tugged in a desperate attempt to free his hands. But he soon found that his efforts were useless. His wrists had been tightly wrapped with stout wire, and his struggles only caused it to bite deeper into his skin.

As he rolled farther over on his side, Bronson felt his short-barreled .44 Special in its holster inside the waistband of his trousers. He lifted the tail of his sheepskin coat and tried to reach it but was unable to do so.

Suddenly there came a grunt of satisfaction from the slender bandit. Bronson heaved himself up on one elbow to watch just as the man stepped back and nodded to the two who had been working on the safe.

"All right, men," he snapped. "Throw rugs over it so it'll muffle the explosion. These smart guys'll find that we know plenty of ways to open safes—even if they do lock 'em on us. Get ready to grab the dough an' be gone if it makes too much noise."

THE other bandits began swiftly covering the top and front of the safe with the heavy rugs from the floor. When several overcoats from the rack in the corner had been added to them, one of the bandits raked a match on the sole of his shoe and held it to a short length of fuse that stuck out from among the rugs.

"You smart guys can turn your backs if

you want to," the slim bandit snarled to the frightened bank employees. "You can even squat behind a desk, but don't try nothin' funny. I'll be watchin' you."

As the people dived for shelter, the sheriff dropped flat on the floor. For a moment he could hear the hiss of the fuse and smell the stench of burning powder. Then came an ear-splitting crack and the muffled crash of the falling safe door.

"That got it, fellas," came a bark from the slim bandit. "Now grab the dough an' let's beat it away from here."

As the outlaws rushed to the safe and began hurling rugs aside out of the way, the sheriff again tried to free his wrists. Heaving and twisting, rolling back and forth, he tugged in a desperate effort to slide the wire down over his hands.

Suddenly he felt a blast of cold air sweep along the floor and fan his face. He darted a quick look at the front door, but saw that it was closed, and that the stocky bandit was still on guard with his tommy-gun. As he heaved himself to one elbow, he found that the cold air was coming from the back of the room.

At first, Bronson thought that the explosion at the safe had possibly broken a window. But as he looked again toward the back of the room he was just in time to see a slight movement in the deep shadow at the end of a row of shelves. He stared for a moment, then his eyes widened and his mouth sagged open. It was the old bum he had left back in his office.

As the old fellow crept noiselessly forward in the shelter of the shelves, the sheriff saw the two old cap-and-ball Remingtons dangling at his hips in their heavy holsters. Bronson frowned and shook his head warningly in an effort to turn him back, but the old man merely smiled and came on. He was rubbing his thin, blue-veined hands together to limber his fingers for the gun play that was coming.

"All right men," came a bark from the slim bandit. "We've made an even better haul here than I figured on. Get to the door an' get set to beat it. We'll take that smart sheriff with us. We can plug him an' ditch him along the road when we're clear of town."

Lugging a heavy canvas bag in his right hand and gripping his short-snouted Luger in his left, the slim bandit stepped around the nearest desk. Two of his men hoisted the sheriff to his feet and started with him around the partition. They were nearly to the door when a chuckling laugh sounded from the end of the shelves.

"That's far enough, gents!" came a harsh command. "Halt an' reach high!"

Startled oaths burst from the five bandits, and they jerked around with their guns flaming. The stocky hombre's tommy-gun crashed in a chattering roar that was instantly stopped by a leaden slug which tore through his throat and knocked him back against the locked door. As he sagged to the floor one of the bandits snatched the tommy-gun from his hands and pivoted around. But before he could shoot, another big slug from one of the old Remingtons ripped through his chest, dropping him across the body of his companion.

Fire streamed from their bucking automatics as the three remaining bandits sent a hail of bullets toward the back of the room in a savage effort to reach the old man who was calming cutting them down. One bandit pulled the sheriff around in front of him, but Bronson pretended to be hit and hastily dropped to the floor.

Screaming orders to his companions, the slim outlaw jumped back and crouched near the corner beneath the cashier's window. Dropping the money sack, he switched the hot Luger to his right hand and swiftly shoved in a fresh clip of steel-jacketed cartridges.

"Get that door open, men!" he yelled as he again began shooting. "Get it open so we can beat it out of here!"

But as the two bandits leaped to the door and tried to drag it open a slug from the old man sent one of them sprawling to the floor. The other tried to get back

out of the way, but a bullet through the shoulder spun him half-around and he sat down with a hoarse cry of agony.

AS THE last of his men went down, the slim bandit crouched closer to the partition, and the sheriff saw him fumble hastily at his left coat sleeve. "Don't shoot no more," he called hastily. "I'm comin' out with my hands up. Don't shoot me! I surrender!"

"Then come out with yore hands high," the old man called. "Keep 'em where I can see 'em, an' don't try no tricks."

"Watch him, old-timer!" the sheriff called sharply, as the bandit leader rose to his feet. "He's up to somethin'! Keep yore eyes on him!"

Holding his hands high above his head, the masked hombre stepped out and stood cursing softly as the old man limped slowly toward him. The old fellow had dropped his long-barreled Remingtons back into his holsters, and was walking with his hands dangling at his sides. The sheriff had seen men walk like that before, and he rose hastily on one elbow to watch. It was an old-time gunfighter's trick to lure a green opponent into trying to beat him to the draw.

The old bum's faded blue eyes were glinting dangerously, but there was a quiet smile on his thin face as he limped steadily closer. He was within a few steps of the bandit when the sheriff saw the slim hombre's hands suddenly come together above his head. He started to yell a warning, but he was too late. Like a flash, the bandit jerked the Luger from his left sleeve with his right hand and brought it streaking down for the death shot. But before he could fire, the old man's right-hand Remington blazed in a bellowing roar through the bottom of his holster, and the bandit staggered back as if a mule had kicked him. The Luger slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor as he took a staggering step.

"I reckon that got him," the old man said hoarsely, his face twisting with pain. "I kind of thought maybe—"

As a fit of coughing struck him, he pressed a hand to his chest and lurched heavily against the partition. As he sank to the floor, a yell from the sheriff brought the bank employees rushing from behind the partition. Some of them ran to help the old man while one hurriedly freed the sheriff's wrists and helped him to his feet.

"Somebody bring some water, quick!" the sheriff barked. "Get some whiskey, if you've got it, an' somebody phone for a doctor! Hurry!"

Bronson dropped to his knees beside the old man and carefully lifted his head. As he did so, the old fellow looked up and smiled wearily.

"I'll be all right," he whispered gamely. "—I've been shot up worse than this many times before. I—"

He shook his head and stopped for a moment to catch his breath. The sheriff held a small bottle of whiskey to his lips, and he took a couple of small swallows. He swallowed again, and a twinkle crept into his faded eyes.

"How about them old guns now, Sheriff?" he chuckled hoarsely. "You still think they haven't a chance against these new-fangled automatic kind?"

The sheriff snapped an oath. Before he could reply, the old man began laughing weakly.

"Sheriff," he said. "I wish you'd look an' see if I've still got my pants on. You said that the Mogollon Kid would've had his pants shot off before he could've cleared leather with one of them old guns. I'd like to know if I've still got 'em on."

"What!" the sheriff almost yelled. "What was that? You mean—"

The old man nodded. "Yes," he chuckled wearily, "I'm the Mogollon Kid —or what's left of him. An' them two old Remingtons were my old guns. They're the ones that was took offn me when I was sent up to the 'big house,' an' I reckon I've proved that they're still plenty good."

The Pup Grows Old

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

THE mournful cry of the trailing hound came across the big sawgrass, and Mase McKay laughed lazily. He stretched six feet of lean, brown swamp man from the sinking hummock where he stood and felt the breeze with his open hand. Then whooped with the joy of being free. That left slough had slowed Old Pelt but not for long.

"Shake a foot, dog! Best trailer, runnin' loose, in the county pack Cap Bailey says. An' my old man give him to the sheriff when Pelt was nothin' but a belly-fed pup. One of Nellie's pups. Swamp raised like me. Maybe I played with that pup around the old man's store when I was a kid. Just can't remember 'em all. But now a Jigger Key hound trailin' me home!"

He went on whooping to the free sky over the Glades. But, boy, his folks would be sore over this runout from the county work camp! Just eleven more days on his thirty-day stretch and Mase could come home free. But that was no fun; Mase had wanted to devil those shotgun guards, raise a rookus, as usual, and get himself talked about. The camp captain's prize county hound would be fooled for once—perhaps. But he hoped Jigger Key folks wouldn't say he took the runout just to go home and see that yellow-haired girl, Sade Bailey, the captain's niece, who was always arguing Mase to settle down. Settle down!

"Come on, dog! Rise, snakes, and sing! I'm headin' for right lonesome country. But flat your ears, snakes, when I pass! But listen to that old hound? Huntin' me down where we was both born and raised." He went on slowly, supremely confident. Sure a mean trick to play on Cap Bailey though.

Bailey bossed a fair camp. No man worked in leg-irons unless he tried the run-

Listen to That Old Hound! Huntin' Me Down Where We Was Both Born and Raised

out—and the swamp licked him in ten miles. Mase laughed contempt for the up-state dogs, fancy critters that worked in a pack and obeyed orders. Not Old Pelt, the lone trailer. Ran free like Mase. Cap Bailey couldn't show favors to a McKay even if some Baileys lived at Jigger, and Old Man McKay was peace justice there. But Cap ought to understand, Mase thought. Mase spent weeks in his grass hut camp, deep-in, because, alone, a man felt free. Too much, perhaps. When he went Outside he got in trouble with Townies because he felt free to stick his gab into affairs that didn't concern him folks said. Liked to argue as he had done with that townie judge. As when, at fifteen, he tried to join Old Spittin' Tiger's clan over at the Seminole hammock, and lead the Tiger and Cumso boys over to the Key West road and take a few townie scalps. All he had got was a grunt; and what he got out of a townie judge was two grunts and thirty days for upsetting a Jook. But today he was free again.

"Yeh, man! Pulled right out under Ed Harp's gun and he's a mean one. A truck o' dynamite goes off back the road and the shotgun guards started to see. I jumped to the sawgrass, and Harp knew he was licked! Run to camp for the dogs. Cap was away so Harp sets Old Pelt after me. Hey, dog, I'm headin' home. Jigger, where you was born like me!"

He smelled jail stink on his sleeve and yelled again. Just when was Pelt a pup? Might be ten, might be fourteen years? But old dog now—and Mase was young. He felt so young and sure at twenty, heading south into the grassy sea, slithering brown-green under the Florida sun. The ditch and bank where the chain gang worked was a blur to the north. Eastward he saw the dim cabbage palm clumps on the hammocks that led to Jigger Key. Jigger folks had laughed when they had heard that Devilin' Mase was working under the guns. Well, he'd have the laugh now when he boasted how easily he had run the guns.

Then, take Work? His old man and his maw and that yellow-haired girl, Sade Bailey, kin to Old Cap, they all worried him about Work. Work? Sure he worked! Running traplines, poling dugouts, guiding hunters and surveyors, town guys like that, through the Glades—wasn't that Work? But they meant some kinda job with a boss—and Mase never had a boss until he got in the county work gang. He strode on lazily listening to the distant hound. He thought he ought to have some sort of excuse for jumping camp, and suddenly he thought of that Bailey girl. Niece of the camp captain, kinda fond of Mase except that he couldn't be serious long enough to find out about this love business.

THEN he thought of something better than love. Them two little Indians over at Spittin' Tiger's hammock! Why it had been on his mind last night when he had squatted at the wires ribbing the gate guard. And telling how he got into a chain gang anyhow.

"That townie judge ain't no sense. Said I was fightin' and cuttin'. All I did was chunk a couple o' Miami bookies over the back rail at Earl's jook over to the Key West road. They landed on a mess o' tin cans and shell, and bled bad. So they swore I knifed 'em. Hell, I never knife nobody. Then bookies was hollerin' to Earl for more gas than they was allowed so I thought I'd chunk 'em. And that townie judge gimme thirty days for fightin' and cuttin'. Hell, McKays don't cut nobody. Anyhow, I didn't even want to fight in my Sattiday night dance pants. They was too tight. Wasn't aimin' to split 'em over two bookies."

"Them bookie boys pretty strong at City Hall," the gate guard had said. "You got a name for devilin' them jooks. If you want to fight, join the Army or go sign up with them Seminole friends o' yourn. The state deer killers are comin' in to clean out the hammocks for tick deer."

Mase had started. He'd heard of that

upstate cattle law. All the deer must be killed so the fool cowses wouldn't catch fever. And he'd boasted to his Seminole friends, deep in the glades that, if ever the state killers came in, he'd warn them. Better than love for an excuse.

So this morning, swinging through the giant grass with the long call of the hound coming above its rustling, Mase remembered his promise. To save the deer on Tiger Hammock for the three Indian families who preferred to live deep in the south glades away from the reservation and white men advisers. Free, that was it, Mase felt. To be sure Old Spittin' Tiger didn't want Mase around either. The three old men of the council had told the young Seminoles to keep away from a man who told them about the great world of jooks over east'ard on the Highway. "Go 'way," Spittin' had grunted: "You always plenty trouble."

"Yeh," Mase had grinned. "If no trouble around I get lonesome."

But now he remembered how stony-faced young Jimmy Tiger and little Johnny Cumso had looked when he told about the state killers. They'd never seen a cow. But the Three Old Men of the Council were Law to the seventy people of the clan. They knew that the Seminoles had never surrendered and had a treaty with the Government, and wanted to be let alone. They had Law. Take the case of Billy Bradd who had gone outside for two years and came back with notions. About liquor and women and all. The Council had warned Billy to stay away from the young girls of Tiger Hammock. They warned him twice; they warned him three times.

Then the Three Old Men met again and called Billy down the shore. The rest was shadowy. Mase knew but he never even told his dad. When some rumor drifted outside the sheriff had called up Mr. McKay and asked what he'd heard. Old Mr. McKay had hung up on the sheriff testily. He'd been peace justice at Jigger Key for years and Indian folks were fine folks. Traded at his store, and his boy, Mase, about raised with them Tiger boys. Anyhow, didn't the sheriff know Seminoles were free folks and always had been since the days of Osceola?

The rest was shadowy. But Mase had stood with Jimmy Tiger in the palmettoes and heard the tribal shotgun go off. He had seen the Three Old Men hobbling back. Spittin' Tiger, Charlie Cumso, Uncle Bradd. Mase saw the moon flicker on their heavy, many-colored skirts and ceremonial jackets. Bradd and Cumso had to half-carry Chief Spittin', for he was ninety and weighed some two hundred. But Old Spittin' carried the ancient muzzleloader and it still smoked. Then Mase faded into the jungle to his dugout and home. The execution shot gun was back on its thongs under the Tiger roofpole the next morning but no young Seminole glanced at it or ever mentioned Billy Bradd. Nor did Mase McKay, neither to white nor Indian.

He went on again in the big grass, listening to that distant dog. He smelled the jail smell again on his sleeve but freedom in the swamp air. Then he whooped again. Sure, that was it—he'd run out because of the Seminole deer about to be exterminated. He'd go warn 'em. Not Spittin' Tiger. Spittin' would just order him off. If he argued Spittin' would peer up at the tribal shotgun. In old days outlaws of many sorts had flown to the deep swamp and vanished. White men who disturbed Indian peace. Right lonesome country around Tiger Hammock.

MASE swung to a swift stride. Damn if he didn't feel kinda noble, takin' the chance of Ed Harp's buckshot gun or maybe six months in jail extra for this run-out, just to save the Indians' deer meat and the skins they needed every winter. He turned to whoop back to the northern skyline. "Come on, dog! It wasn't just to devil them guards, see if they could catch me! Gotta job, hound! Outa my way, snakes, it's me comin'!"

He loped lightly where he could, shouldered the savage grass blades where he must. They cut at a touch. On and on over rotten rock outcrop, around pools, highlighted and silent in the grassy sea. He found a hurricane-drifted log and stood on it to find landmarks. Far in the south was the blur of the first coastal mangroves fringing salt water. He'd traveled fast now, and Old Pelt was silent, seeking the trail, soberly nosing for it, and he wouldn't call again until he was sure. The camp captain swore his prize hound knew all the tricks.

"But me," Mase grinned. "Good dog but runnin' a good man. I'm travelin' deep an' far." He halted and thought; Mase was a gabby guy who thought best when he yelled it to the world. "Boy, what's the use goin' home? Just get bawled out fer a fool, an' the deputies'll come to Jigger, an' I'd have to move on. Now I can go to Tiger Hammock an' warn 'em. Jimmy'll get me a canoe and grub. I'll head back o' the Ten Thousand Isles. Nellie was a great bitch but she never sucked a pup that could find me once I'm clear o' the big grass an' into mangrove."

He whooped and went on: "Come, hound! Show what you got! I'll make the Gulf camps and jump a boat fer the Campeche banks. Stay outa Jigger a year mebbe. Boy, they'll be sore. Cap'll know the dog was licked. That Sade Bailey'll git uneasy about me—mebbe. Only I hate to worry maw, sure do."

But he went on chuckling. All the work they had got out of him with the county gang hadn't sweated a foot. Cap blustered and Ed Harp cursed. But as cap advised his chief deputy, Old Man McKay was peace justice at Jigger, and 'lection coming on, maybe they better not put heat on young Mase. McKays controlled about forty votes in the back swamp the sheriff had hinted to Cap Bailey. But a runout now, that was different. Couldn't let even a McKay make a fitified fool of the Law and brag about it later. No, they'd have to get him back.

"Rise, snakes, an' sing! I'm on the stomp fer right lonesome country. But when I pass, snakes, flat your ears. Me—comin'!"

Then he heard that hound. A good trail cry and nearer. Mase reflected. Pelt had picked up milage by cutting corners, knowing where a fugitive would turn at a mud pool but a young dog would be delayed. The gun guards would be far back but in earshot of Pelt's yodeling. Ed Harp would know each note. Pelt confused, Pelt confident; Pelt triumphant, his prey in sight, for surrender. Not Mase McKay.

Mase began arguing again with himself. He was a sociable guy and if no one was about he'd talk to a snake, a rabbit, a sandfly that lit on his nose; he'd raise his voice to holler at the mystery of the sky, wondering if God A'Mighty had time to listen to gab. Then that dog called again, mournful, ruthless, implacable.

"Pickin' up on me," said Mase. "You ol' devil, one o' Nellie's pups, trailin' a McKay. Tellin' Ed Harp you're closin' near me. Why you're worse than that Sade Bailey always jawin' at me to settle down, git a job. That girl, kinda proud, techy—she wouldn't like jail smell on a man. Come on dog, we ain't settlin' down!"

HE GRINNED and smelled his sleeve, then the free air. He smelled mudbanks, the musk of cottonmouths, brush that a panther had touched, the sawgrass cruel and rustling, whispering of freedom. The serrated blades had cut his wrists and he laughed. Pelt, you'll love it. Run a blood trail, dog; it's easier. Mase settled to a long Indian stride when he felt the muck lessen under his feet, and there was clear water over limestone patches. Ibis and egrets took to the air by the first tidal lake, and here was an oak hammock where he climbed a stunted tree to plot a course. Westward the faint smudge of Tiger Hammock, south, the big slough which the Seminoles used to reach his father's trade store at Jigger Key. East from Jigger ran

the grass road to the great world of Jooks where a swamp boy felt techy about bookies in big cars. He planned to turn up the slough and opposite Tiger Hammock he'd signal Jimmy and Johnny out and warn them of the state killers. They'd find him a canoe and coontie flour cakes, maybe dried deer or panther meat. The Three Old Men would never know he'd passed their village. They would order every child and woman into the huts until the last State gunshot had ceased in their woods and then wonder where the winter's meat would come from. Spittin' would never ask for Government rations for his clan.

Six hours since the runout. Mase tired a little and blood was through his torn clothes, for he wasn't taking care now.

"Don't need to care," he argued. "I'm leavin' you dog, right here at the slough. 'Nother hour I'll be 'crost water and then into mangrove country with a dugout. Boy, over West'ard the whole Guvment can't git a man out. Live on coon oysters and cabbage palm. South is the coast mangrove, ol' dead hurricane jungle. Man can fork it, but a dog can't. Not even you, Pelt. End o' trail Pelt, right here. Sit on your ol' pore tail an' beller for Harp an' the pack. An' you don't like them upstate hounds either. Like me—wanta run free an' alone. Settle down, hell—what that Bailey girl think you an' me is made of?"

The breeze had died. The sun was level over the grassy sea, and when he stood on the slough's edge, sky and water were blue and pink, and hurricane-month storm clouds, black based on the distant Gulf, glacier white at the peaks, beckoned that there were wilder spaces.

Then he saw a dot west'ard and it was moving. A Seminole dugout poled slowly along, and he knew his friends shortly. Jimmy Tiger and little Johnny Cumso, and they were leaving camp at sundown when Indians usually holed up. And while Mase watched silently he heard another sound apart from the distant creak of pushpoles against wood. The beat of a motor over east'ard; and he recognized that also. The camp workboat which Cap Bailey used to fetch supplies down the road canal.

"Well, of all things, comin' around down the lake to head me off in a boat! Why I ain't knowed cap to take after a runout in years! Boy, you musta got his dander up, hurt his pride in that dog, to take out after me himself. But a boat, now, it ain't fair. Never knowed them Baileys to be mean—except that Sade is always after me to quit swamp-runnin' an' git a job. Hey, hound, you oughta be 'shamed of 'em! You an' Cap gittin' old and need a boat!"

But Mase was sure proud. He'd stirred the whole county outfit up to trap him. The big boss and every shotgun man. Big joke!

Sure a joke. In ten minutes Jimmy Tiger would have him across the water. Old Pelt would reach the edge and there would end the jail smell and the warm blood trace. Dark coming, and by dawn Mase would be where salt tides flowed through the mangrove islands west'ard. The county men could go to Tiger Hammock and question Spittin', and a lot they'd learn. Spittin' would give them a grunt even if he knew of a runout man. Not Indian business, any white man's law. Mase laughed and stood out from the grass. He heard another dog now, far and faint to the east'ard. Old Pelt in the grass behind him was silent.

"Ol' Cap got his dogs on that boat. That little bitty sorry blue hound he's trainin' to take Pelt's place. Earl'll be handlin' 'em. Cap can't spraddle grass no more. Gittin' old—like Pelt."

HE WENT along the bank and the two young Indians saw him. He lifted an arm and they were silent, upright, watchful. Mase grinned again. He'd be safe across there. Joke. Jailhouse or workcamp—big joke. Runnin' free—big joke! Ribbin' them gun guards and all, when your old man's got forty votes around Jigger Key and 'lection on. Joke—big joke! He waved his hand and Jimmy waved back.

The dugout drifted to the bank, Jimmy on the flat stern and Johnny forward. But before Mase could greet them little Johnny Cumso motioned. He pointed to his feet. Mase saw something move. A thin rump with matted hair and blood. Then two big ears flicked up and a buck-fawn's black eyes showed above the canoe side. Mase bent over closer.

"Well, I swear! So that state outfit got in from the Gulf side did it? Gunshot this buttonbuck did they? Boy, I was on my way to warn you. I figgered if you had warnin' you might drive some o' them Hammock deer back in a piece. Hide 'em out where the state killers would miss 'em. But you got wind of it first, did you?"

"Come kill," said little Johnny and was silent again.

"Tell me quick," grunted Mase. "I got plenty trouble."

"Two boat," said Jimmy Tiger stolidly. "Eight mens. Four dogs. Come from up, yesterday. Kill deer on West Hammock yesterday. Come to Tiger tomorrow. Kill all. Spittin' Tiger stay in house. All. No good. Johnny find this little buttonbuck shot. Sneak him home. Spittin' Tiger say, no. Me and Johnny drive most deer out. That way."

He motioned across the water and was dumb again. That was a mighty long speech for a Seminole Mase reasoned. Jimmy Tiger was disturbed deeply. Mase bent over to look at the wounded fawn. Little Johnny Cumso sat down by the wet animal and smoothed a gunshot leg. Then he looked up silently at Mase.

"Fight," he said. Mase nodded and arose. Jimmy held the dugout to the bank with the pole and nodded.

"You see? Johnny say fight. Johnny load my shotgun plenty buckshot. Johnny say the mens come near he shoot. Me too."

Mase stood up and rubbed the blood from his wrist across his nose.

"Better not. Don't let the state men find you. Put me across. We'll drive them deer hell-wards deep. They can live a few days in the mangrove. That upstate gang will go home not findin' many on Tiger Hammock. But don't fight. Lookit me, I got thirty days—fightin' and cuttin' the town judge said. I ain't a hand to holler and complain but I wasn't cuttin'."

The boys looked stolidly at him. They hadn't heard of that. But Jimmy Tiger began to wonder at Mase. Wet and bleeding and heated by flight. Suspicious and watchful now, Jimmy lifted a finger to the wind. Maybe he heard a running hound far in the grass. Mase couldn't and he was a good swamp man. Johnny stood up listening. Then he lifted the old shotgun and stared north. He cocked both barrels and said:

"Boat over east. Dog north way. We go now. Drive deer other way."

"Yeh," said Mase. "But lay off that shotgun. Spittin' wouldn't like it. Nobody like it. Even I got more sense. Listen to me—"

He stopped for the trailing hound broke out full and magnificent. Close beyond the big grass. Very close.

The Seminoles moved swiftly. Jimmy said: "Boat, that bad. They cross now after deer."

"Boat?" Mase grunted. "That ain't the state boat. It's the Law chasin' me. Now a boat ain't fair, headin' me off with a boat."

"Run," said Jimmy. "Get in dugout and cross. We all drive deer."

But Mase listened and shook his head. "It won't do. The deputies would land their dogs after me and find your deer. The state killers would be right after 'em. No, you go drive your deer deep in back. I'll take down the slough. Old Pelt'll foller me. They'll foller Pelt."

THE Seminoles didn't understand but they started. Mase saw the dugout vanish into the giant sawgrass across the slough. Johnny Cumso would carry his little wounded buck until he found a safe hideout.

Mase went on slowly. Then Old Pelt broke to glorious triumph mighty close. He knew there was water ahead and help nearing, and his man was trapped. Mase knew it too unless he got rid of this hound at once. Across the slough had been safety, derisive triumph over Ed Harp and the Law—but death for the Indians' deer. Now he was being trailed to the Point and a dozen dogs would clamor about his heels.

"Treed," he grumbled. "Ain't it hell, now? Cap'll boast and brag about his ol' hound never failed yet. Jigger folks'll laugh their fool heads off—me treed. Sade Bailey'll shake her yeller hair and say she don't want a man around that smells jail smell anyhow. Hey, hound! Lift a foot. I ain't treed yet. Might fool you, hound—you gittin' old and me runnin' free. Bet me I shake jail smell too."

He went slowly toward the oak point in the dusk. Old Pelt was silent now, nosing water patches patiently, finding scent across but giving no voice until he was sure. Mase picked a way carefully to delay him at the last. Maybe he could circle him into the grass again, slip back along the tidal lakes. If not he'd have to take to the oaks against those other dogs. Shucks, it was worse than trying to make up your mind about was you in love mebbe?

He crossed a muddy branch and recalled that, with the Tiger boys, he had trapped it when they were kids. Spittin' never had known their secret meetings. Mase grinned, thinking of the mystery the Three Old Men would have tomorrow; the Hammock deer vanished, and the state hunters going back to report there were none to slaughter. It made Mase feel better; he'd saved the deer for his friends.

"Yeh, snakes! Flat your ears, sing low when I pass—"

Then he turned at a sound. Up this narrow branch not a hundred feet away, Old Pelt had come out of the grass. Nose high and ears dragging. Bony gray back weaving and he was slow. His eyes were bad and he didn't see his man.

"Hound," Mase whispered. "You're tuckered out. Been a good dog—" He whirled at another sound. Young dogs clamoring to be ashore from the boat rounding the oak point. But Mase went swiftly toward it. Now he had a chance. Turn up the swamp lake shore to the grass again. Old Pelt had run his feet off; and this took a swamp dog to follow.

Mase laughed again and slipped on Indian stealthily. Then he heard another noise. Sort of a metal click but he knew it. He turned and saw water circling in the slough by the muddy grass. Choking gurgles, and then the surface broke. Old Pelt's gray muzzle came up and his deep eyes were level with the water. Then his head went down and his bony rump came up. He fought savagely at something under him.

"Trap," Mase muttered. "Jimmy must have left otter trap here last season or else he put one out to worry the state dogs. Pelt shoved a foot in it. He's duckin' now tryin' to bite his leg off afore he drowns like a muskrat. Trap keep sinkin' more he fights it. Hey, dog!"

He went back and squatted by the mud whirl and stared silently. Shove Pelt under and let him drown! Then he was safe. Nobody in the world laugh at him for being treed. He'd shut that Sade Bailey up quick if she ever mentioned her uncle Cap's famous hounds. He'd show her he was free swamp man. No wimmen bossed him ever.

"Cut out that foot-chewin'. Hound, you wanta hobble the rest o' yore born days? Trap yoreself like a fool. What'll Cap say? One o' Nellie's pups you was—drowned dead tomorry."

He waded to the bubbles, and lifted the writhing dog. Boy, his ribs were puckering in, he was so ga'nt! Mase found the stake chain and yanked. They all came out on the grass, a bundle of bloody mud. Pelt stretched and silently watched the man kneel on the spring and lift his torn paw from the steel. Didn't move; just stared up in the dusk.

"If you was my dog I'd learn you about wadin' traplines. Hound, yore brains is slippin'." He tore his shirtsleeve to strips, mopped the mud and blood, and then, with a drier piece, bound twisted tendons. Then Mase stood up and laughed:

"Smell me, you ol' man-hunter! Smell that bug dope from the stockade! Smell blood, too. Mebbe last time—mebbe end o' the trail for you."

He listened. That boat was nearing behind the Point. The motor snarled the mud. Mase crouched and went along behind the grass ridge to the Point. That oak clump was his chance. The county boat would pass unseeing him—sure—if Pelt was silent. Pelt, crippled, a man could double back into the grass later when the gun guards left. If Pelt got to his feet he could follow and raise voice . . . he could. Mase went on and looked from the turn. That hound hadn't moved except to twist his head and fix sad eyes upon the fugitive.

"Holler," grunted Mase. "Let 'em know. Or mebbe you know yore licked. Met up with a good swamp man and licked. Cap wouldn't like it. One o' Nellie's pups, I wouldn't either. Hell, dog, I didn't steal ner nothin' like that. Just fightin'—an' you know damn well McKays don't do cuttin'."

HE STARTED for the Point and he heard the boat grounding on a bar. The motor was shut off, and he heard talking. He heard splashing, heavy boots in the shallows. Captain Bailey led, and he was like a man tired and sorry and wishing he was somewhere else.

"You and Earl go along to left o' the Point," he ordered heavily. "You other two men take the right. We'll thresh in a piece and wait fer Harp. Pelt and that no-'count McKay'll be somewhere's between."

Mase heard them wading. Well, if they took both sides of the Point he better not turn. The deputies might spot him out in the grass. The best chance was straight to the moss-hung oak on the Point. No trick to it. The camp captain was wading slowly. Long before he reached the shell beach Mase had wormed through the seagrape, close to the oak and then up to the gray moss to stretch flat out on a thick limb. Then he looked back through the dusk. If Pelt gave voice? Hell, he was treed just like a damn swamp cat and that was disgrace! He sure didn't mean that but here he was—treed after all. Jigger Key folks would sure laugh.

Cap Bailey came on right under the oak and followed the grass bank. Mase lost him against the gray-red furnace of sunset. Old Cap was mumbling to himself. Then the mumble stopped abruptly.

"Found him," muttered Mase. "Now, what? Got me fitchered, them two!"

He raised to see and Cap's back was bent. Mase heard him again.

"Why, boy, what's this? That McKay skunk gunshot you?" Then Cap saw the steel trap in the mud. He saw a rag tied about Pelt's torn paw and he raised the leg to smell and see. Jail smell sure enough. Cap stood up and he was whispering. Then he was coming back and Pelt was in his arms. He didn't call to his deputies spread far in the grass. He came to the Point and looked at his boat. Then at his quiet hound. Old Pelt had raised his dripping head from Cap's arms and he was watching above into the gray moss jungle. Cap didn't look up. He began to grumble again. He moved a yard from the oak and Pelt tried to look back and up.

"Hound, I didn't train you to tree swamp cats. Might be panther too. You ain't fitten to fight. We get aboard and get coffee goin', you and me. You could go some hush-puppies and sowbelly meat I bet me."

He went to the water's edge and stopped and spoke more loudly.

"Now, Pelt, I ain't advisin' you. Holler or not, yore the judge. Even if you treed a McKay he'd lie about it when he got home. But you could tree 'em, the best of 'em. On three legs you could run 'em

down. But to think I go put myself out cruisin' an' perousin' down here just because that Sade Bailey raises hell with the sheriff an' all. Sheriff calls me up next an' says, let that damn fool McKay outa camp. That girl says his Army notice came to Jigger Key and she thinks mebbe the Army don't want a man from county camp. So I hustle back and Harp says the damn fool took a run on us. He oughta be home tellin' his maw good-by, Sade says. Well, come, Pelt; sowbelly fer us."

Far in the grass the man-hunters were grumbling. They didn't see sense in running a guy down who kept 'em all worried in camp. Cap waded a yard. The hound twisted his head about Cap's cheek to watch the tree and he was puzzled. Mystery and pain in his deep eyes.

"I forget." Cap turned back to the ridge. He took a paper from his pocket and stuck it under a shell. Then he waded for the boat.

"Come on, dog. You run him down, didn't you? You treed him—fer the Army, didn't you? I dunno, in gineral, if the Army wants a man who gits himself treed, after jumpin' my camp fer fightin' an' cuttin'. I dunno as it was cuttin'. If it hadn't been fer that Sade girl callin' up an' worryin' us, this damn fool mighta run deep swamp an' holed himself up fer next three years. Missed fightin' them Japs. Then he would been sore on us. But you saved him, didn't you, dog, to git his notice? You an' Sade. Come, dog, Devilin' Mase ain't none of our business."

Mase heard and he called softly: "Better baby that broke foot. Chewed plug is better than drug-store stuff. And in gineral, no McKay gits treed. He spraddles up to get his nose in free air. Free!"

Cap was on his boat and started below. Then the hound howled. It wasn't a trail call nor a treed call. Kind of funny sound. Started full, magnificent, and broke to a wail of mystery and puzzlement.

"Hush, dog," Cap whispered. "I know. Think you failed on the last trail you ever run. You ain't failed. You treed the feller that brags he's a swamp runner. But mebbe, you an' me ain't lettin' folks know. That girl, Sade, and the McKays. They'd laugh. So jest you an' me know. Pelt, you done yore duty."

A light came on in the cabin. Cap's whistle called the man-hunters in from the starlight. Mase heard them grumbling relief. They didn't want this Devilin' McKay back in camp to worry them. They hoped he'd get snake bite or mire in a loblolly, something tough—though it was agreed McKays didn't do cuttin'. Aboard the deputies were surprised to find Old Pelt in a bunk and Cap doctoring his foot. Might be snakebite, but Cap didn't explain and when he didn't explain he wasn't a man you questioned.

Mase waited until the running lights came on the boat before he climbed down. The searchlight picked up the Point briefly and it gleamed upon that paper Cap had left. Mase tried to read it in the flash—something about the Army sure. Mase had been educated fine until he was eleven, and then the schoolhouse blew away. Jigger Key kids yelped with joy, except Sade Bailey. They didn't believe in schoolhouses no time, nowhere.

Mase took the long swamp miles home in the starry dark. Took a good man as he advised the snakes. It was dawn when he passed the palmetto scrub on the west end of Jigger Key and saw the lone pine above his father's store. He smelled of his sleeve absently; his ma would sure holler and hug him. No jail bug dope left he thought. He checked a whoop out in the rutty road before the row of unpainted shacks which was Jigger Key Main Street.

"Smell free," he grinned. "That old hound run me till I'm washed free o' sin an' sufferin'. Sing glory, snakes, I'm home!"

JIGGER KEY folks got up early when trapping was on. But not this early. Mase decided to get a drink from some

one's rainbarrel and then cut loose. One good whoop would let the village know he was back. "Sing low, snakes, I'm passin'—"

Then a window went up creakily. Sade Bailey's face was framed by the screen and some kind of flowery wammus, like town wimmen sleep in, was her background.

"You be quiet. Blood and mud all over you—and what are you laughing about?"

"Boy, I had a night. I run 'em all ragged. Day and night—"

She pushed up the screen and took hold of his sleeveless shirt. The same look in her eyes that had been in the old dog's. Mystery and judgment—and beyond these, faith. He couldn't grin again.

"You got your call, Mase, that I sent to the camp?"

"Sure, I'm called. Called an' fitten to fight. But, Sade, you ought to seen me draggin' the heart out of them gun guards an' dogs. All except—"

"Treed!" she said and pulled him closer, and laughed. "Old Pelt. I don't smell jail smell. I smell dog on you. And oak, and moss. No fooling, Mase, that hound ran you down!"

"You're smart," Mase grinned. "Sometimes I get scared of you, Sade, and dunno what to do. Lots of times I aimed to tell you—well, ask you—then I'd get so full o' feelin' I'd have to run swamp an' holler snakes. Snakes an' swampcats can't settle down. You say it!"

Then she did laugh; she pulled him closer and kissed his swollen lips. "Marry you? Not now! You're going in the Army. The Army'll settle you down—for me. You're not a bad boy if you wouldn't hunt trouble. Fighting those Japs, that's what you need."

"You wait. I'll run 'em bowlegged. I'll —but I'm marryin', first!"

She laughed and shoved him away from the window.

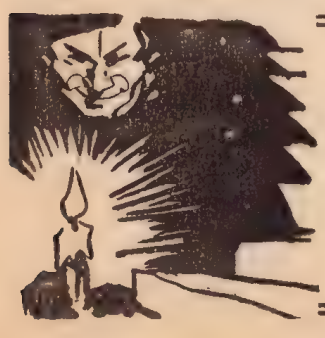
"Go home and wash up and see your mother. Then come. I'll be waiting here, Mase." She stopped and looked at him so intently, her blue eyes grave and steady, that he twisted and tried to think of dogs and snakes and all free things under the sky. That Army now? Would a guy feel free? Suddenly he grabbed Sade's hands and shook them; he rattled the window frame and yelled.

"Time to holler folks out! Right afore breakfast, I'm lettin' 'em know. Goin' to git married an' go in the Army! Sade, I'm goin' home an' start maw cookin' for the weddin'! Boy, she'll be glad! Always said you could settle me sometime!"

She watched him go, and he was singing. She called: "Mase, what can I do for you first?"

"Git word over to Cap Bailey to come and bring Ol' Pelt. I aim to dance with that hound at the weddin'. A dog just needs two legs. Rise, snakes an' sing!"

But he sobered a bit on the way home. "A married guy has got to feel serious. Got to have my Sattiday night dance pants ironed up for the weddin'. Then Sade can lay 'em away till I git back from the Army. First them Japs, and then I aim to go over to Key West road an' take on them jooks."



All Chinatown guarded the SKY DRAGON TREASURE . . . yet it vanished.

"The One-Eyed Mask"

A novelette in our next issue by

WALTER C. BROWN

Adventurers All

Forced Landing in Australia

THE Australian summer of 1925 broke with its usual burning ferocity. Added to the discomfort of the humid heat of the Northern Territory the dreaded scourge, smallpox, broke out. It was attributed to one or other of the small Japanese schooners that infested those waters in the pre-war era; searching for bêche-de-mer? Darwin was without sufficient vaccine to cope with it. So the medical authorities sent an S.O.S. through to the laboratories in Brisbane, Queensland, asking for immediate assistance.

There was no railway line further than Camooweal. Not even a bush track through the Mulga Scrub and Desert. It would take three weeks to get the vaccine there by boat, so it was decided to fly it the 700 miles from Camooweal to Darwin.

I was next on the roster to fly the mail from Camooweal to Cloncurry, but headquarters at Eagle Farm, the aerodrome at Brisbane, telephoned me to stand by ready to fly the vaccine through. We fueled up the DH-50 till the tanks were flowing over. The mechanics swarmed over the machine, making sure that everything was in order. It was impossible to get any weather reports, for the area over which I was to fly was completely uninhabited. So there was no way of foretelling whether I would have headwinds or not.

At Camooweal there was no trace of a breeze, but what winds I might meet with at 5,000 feet no one could forecast. From long experience us pilots knew that that was the best altitude for safety and to make the best speed. Word had got round the small township of Camooweal of what the company was about to attempt and quite a crowd had gathered when Pat Cochrane flew in from Brisbane with the vaccine on board. Willing hands transferred the packages from his machine to mine and wedged them in the passengers' cabin with cotton wool and straw. It was a bare half hour after his arrival that I taxied down the makeshift aerodrome and headed into wind. As I gathered speed in the take off I could see the crowd waving but couldn't hear the shouting above the roar of the Siddeley Puma engine.

I wasted no time or gasoline in circling to gain altitude. I set my course northwest and climbed steadily. By the time I had reached 5,000 feet I was over the Barkley Table Lands. There were still signs of human habitation and underneath I could see the cattle as they ringed the waterholes. I settled myself comfortably in my seat, for I had almost a five hour journey ahead of me. Aircraft in those days had not the speed or the range of the

modern air transport. I was unable to smoke, for I was sitting behind the cabin in an open cockpit.

Beside the vaccine in the cabin I carried a skin of water. Around my waist was strapped my revolver holster. Not that I expected to need either, for I had no doubt that I would get through safely. It all depended on whether I struck headwinds or not. Soon the Table Lands were left behind and then underneath the Mulga Scrub seemed to stretch interminably, interspaced with an occasional eucalyptus tree. Two hours after leaving Camooweal I had left all vestige of human life behind. I could not even see an aborigine encampment.

As I passed over the McArthur River I looked down and saw the river bed was dry. For company I had my thoughts and occasionally I would flash by a vulture who flew away from my machine in a tremendous hurry. In the crystal clear air I saw a blur miles and miles away on the left, which I knew must be Daly Waters. That would be the closest I would get to human beings until I neared my destination. I knew that the maps I carried were not accurate, so it was no use attempting to compute my ground speed. Just hope for the best and carry on. The engine purred away smoothly and then I passed over the Roper River, which like the McArthur was dried up. Soon I was over the wooded mountain range that separated me from Darwin. Only 200 miles to go, but my fuel gauges were dropping fast. Faster than I cared for.

Then the range gave way to the almost flat table land on the final approach to Darwin. I knew that about thirty to forty miles away on my left lay the Adelaide River and beyond that the railway line that ran from Darwin to Daly Waters. When I estimated I had only fifty miles to go my engine began to cough and splutter. My gasoline gauges on both tanks had been empty for some little time, but I had hoped I would be all right.

Evidently I had had fairly strong headwinds, for I had nursed my engine along at cruising the whole way. Anxiously I looked round for a spot in which to put her down. Underneath stretched the interminable Scrub, with an occasional eucalyptus. There was not a clear space anywhere, and I was circling in wide spirals looking for the most likely spot.

IT WAS not going to be the first time I had piled up, but always the same clutching fear attacked me; the thought of being trapped in the cockpit, injured and unable to help myself. At 500 feet, with a dead motor, and my shirt sticking to my back through fright I slipped the catch of my safety belt. The ground came up to meet me. Then the wheels brushed the top of the Mulga and I wrenched back on the control column so as to pancake into the brush.

My wheels caught a stump and over we went. The over turning plane acted as a catapult and I was hurled through the air until a small tree stopped my involuntary flight.

A snap and a throbbing pain in my left arm told me it was broken. I struggled back to the overturned machine and fortunately by lying down I was able to reach into the cockpit and grab the small emergency axe which a bush pilot always carried. With that I smashed the windows of the cabin and was able to reach the first aid emergency kit. Stripping off my flying coat, although it hurt like hell, after a lot of cursing, I managed to strap my broken arm firmly to my side. Then once more wriggling under the cockpit I pried loose the compass. That was my sole means of guiding myself to help. My water bottle was three-quarters full, but I could not manage to reach the water skin in the cabin.

With my compass, water bottle and revolver I set off through the Scrub to the west. I knew the overland telegraph line that ran from Darwin to Adelaide lay in that direction. I also knew the wire was

only nine to ten feet high off the ground, just high enough to allow cattle and camels to pass underneath it. If only I could get to that and break the wire, I knew I would be located and assistance would reach me.

Up and down gullies and small ravines I struggled through the Scrub. The pain in my arm was terrific but I knew if I did not keep on going I was dead meat. Night fell and as my compass was not illuminated, I lay down beside an iron bark tree and rested, waiting for the dawn. I had no fear of snakes during the night, for they do not travel during darkness. Occasionally I would hear the yelp of a dingo and the rustling and squeaking of small animal life as it went about its business. By five o'clock in the morning it was light enough to read my compass card, so I struggled on my way bearing westward all the time.

The sun came up. I had thrown away my flying helmet the afternoon before because it seemed to conserve the heat. My revolver followed in the wake of the helmet and by noon, although I had used my water very sparingly, the water bottle went dry and that followed in the wake of the other two.

Clutching my compass I stumbled and struggled along. I thought I would never reach the wire, and in the evening of the day following the crash I sat down for one of my periodic rests from utter weariness and pain. I had not even a cigarette; not that I would have been able to smoke it with my burning mouth and swollen tongue.

I had been sitting there in a half daze in a clearing in the Scrub about fifteen feet in diameter. My eyes looked upwards and I thought I was beginning to see things, for there only fifteen feet away, silhouetted against the brilliant blue sky was a black line. By the grace of God I had sat down to rest when I did, otherwise I would have stumbled on past the overhead telegraph wire. The sight of it gave me new energy and I reeled along the direction of the wire for a few yards, and there was a telegraph pole. The job now was to break the wire. I sat and looked at it. With my broken arm I did not see how I was going to climb the pole. I knew if I could only break that wire I would be located, for I was long overdue, and the search parties would be out. All they needed to help them was some signal from me.

I did not dare light a fire, as not only might it have set hundreds of square miles alight, but if the wind had changed I would have roasted. At last an idea came to me. I undid my belt and strapped my body to the pole. Then, using the belt as a leverage I edged myself up inch by inch. Finally I got to the small cross tree and was able, by leaning back against my belt to bring my heel up and smash the china insulator.

As it broke, so did my belt and I fell to the ground. I recovered consciousness to find a group from Darwin around me. The black trackers they had with them had already set off along the trail I had left to where the wrecked machine lay, so as to get the vaccine. They placed me on a litter.

I made my entry into Darwin, not as I imagined I would, by flying in, but being carried, head foremost, by four of the black trackers.

Charles Kennett.

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No-Shirt McGee Helps the Army Out in the Neighborhood of Hell Roaring Canyon and Dead Man's Island

FLIGHT OUT OF COLD DECK

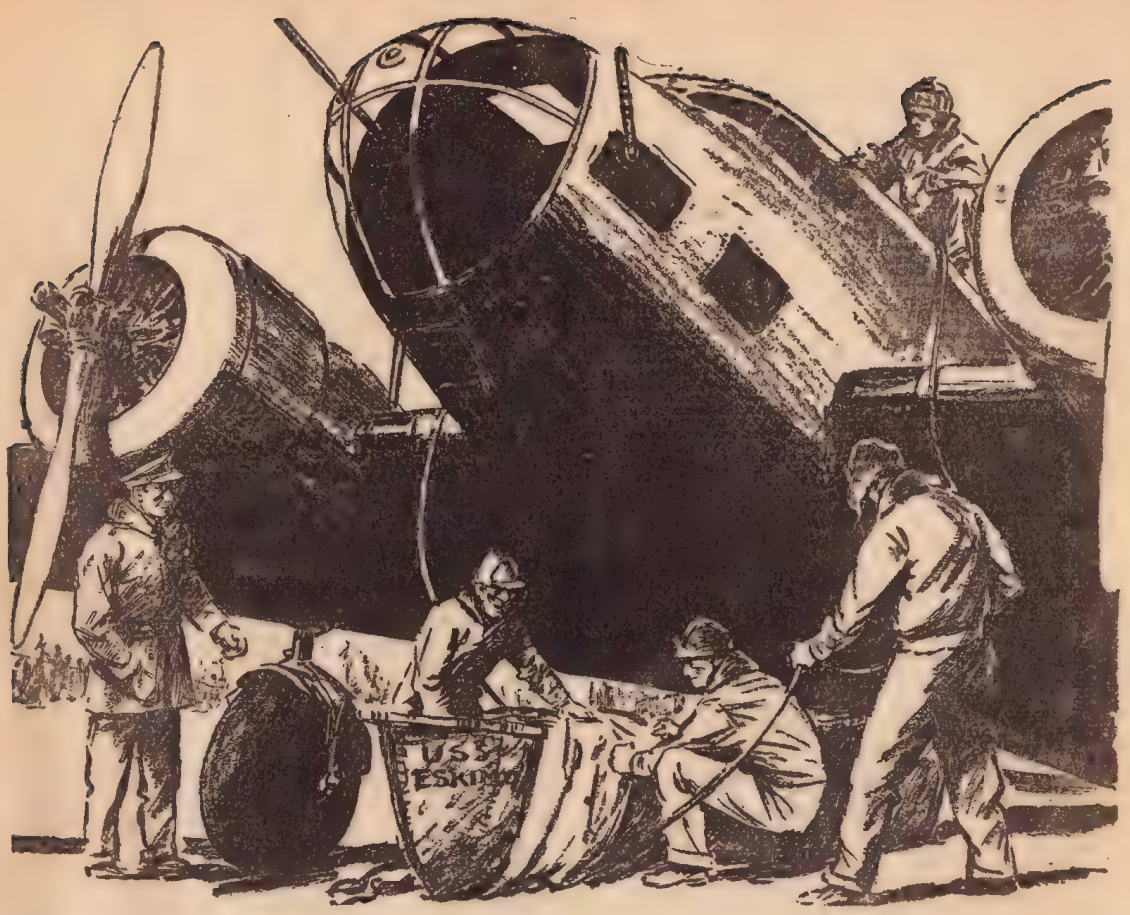
By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Commando McGee," etc.

ME AND my pardner, Bulldozer Craig, are out at the Cold Deck, Alaska, airport, watching flurries of snow and listening to the planes thunder overhead as they try to find a hole through the ceiling.

One comes through at last, almost cracks up and skids to a stop. It's a medium bomber and as the crew climbs out and limbers up their legs I can tell there's no good news to report. It gives me a funny feeling inside of the stomach, and when I light a cigar to sorta quiet my nerves, my fingers shake and Bulldozer has to light it for me. "Hang onto yourself, No-Shirt," he says with a hope he don't feel, "they may find the lost plane yet. You know how it is, up here, settlements hundreds of miles apart, plenty of rough country between. Well, more than one bunch has walked away from a plane and spent days, even weeks, gettin' out. The first thing you know Bill March, and the others, will come out under their own power. They'll be full of moose and ptarmigan meat, they'll have spade beards and they'll be lean and tough."

I knew how it was. I'd been stranded by planes myself when flying first become



popular in Alaska, and I'd lived off the country and walked out. I'd even read accounts of my death, and you'd be surprised what a hell of a fine upstandin' citizen a man has been after he's dead. I had qualities no McGee ever possessed.

But this whole set-up was different. First, Bill March was the son of an old gal of mine. I'd had quite a crush on Anna, his mother, but his dad Big Bill March had been the lucky man. When little Bill was five, his father was killed in a mine cave-in. Anna March set her jaw, as everybody expected she would, and earned enough money teaching school and prospecting on the side, to keep her boy in school and decently dressed.

When Bill was nearly through high school she was hurt in an auto accident while she was vacationing in California. A year later No-Shirt McGee, being in the money, staked Bill enough each year to finish high school and enter the University of Washington, at Seattle. This man, McGee, put up the dough, also, for the kid's flying lessons. He had the idea of starting a small passenger and freight airplane business in Alaska, and growing up with the country.

Yes, you're right, McGee backed him in that, but don't go handing out any bouquets. It was a good business proposition and making money until he dropped in on me one day and said, "We've come to the parting of the ways, No-Shirt, I'm afraid. I'd like to sell out to a company that has contracted to do a lot of war work all over Alaska."

"You're going to war, eh?" I suggested.

"That's right," he answered. "Flying, of course."

"Sell out, then," I agreed.

"And none of this talk about a young man sacrificing his business for his country," he reminded me. I could feel a speech coming on and he must have sensed it. "Here in Alaska, particularly if you've seen Japs and their floating salmon canneries in the Bristol Bay country, we know how close they are. A man fighting, is

protecting his own interest. As I figure it, No-Shirt, Alaska is going to see a lot of war. If the Japs don't come to us, we'll use it as a springboard to go after them. When the war's over there'll be thousands of lads who've spotted opportunities up here. Alaska's best days are ahead, and I, for one, can pick up where I left off."

WELL, that was Bill Marsh's frame of mind when he went south to go through the training period for army aviation.

Naturally, because he'd flown all over Alaska, he was stationed up here as soon as he got his wings.

A month ago he'd come to me, and I knew by the gleam in his eyes, something big was in the wind. "You've been pretty swell to me, No-Shirt, all these years," he said. "And if I told you just how I felt about you I might slop over."

"That's the way I feel about you, Bill," I said, and I was damned close to the slopping over point myself, because something told me this kid was going on an important mission, and he wasn't at all sure he'd be back.

"You know how it is with mother," Bill had continued, "she's been around in that wheel chair several years now. The fact is, we know she isn't going to get out of it—ever."

"Yes, I know that."

"She's always kept her chin up."

"That's right. If there was any fun to be had in life, she had it, and if there wasn't any fun, she made it," I told Bill.

"Okay," he continued, "you know I manage to call her up every Mother's Day. Sometimes it was by short wave over the radio. Maybe I'd be in the air, or down on some river bar waiting for the weather to get decent, but I called her. I've an idea I can't get that call through, this year."

"She'll understand—on account of the war, private conversations, particularly from Alaska, are out," I suggested.

"That would be okay with her, No-Shirt," he said. Then he handed me a letter. "If I don't show up a week before Mother's Day, send her this. It'll go air mail." Then he shook hands. "S'long, No-Shirt. You're tops for my dough. And give Bulldozer a water glass full of whiskey for me."

Well, that's the way one boy went to war.

I THOUGHT a lot about Bill March in the days that followed. His plane had been a special job. He was second in command, which meant the skipper was something mighty special. The navigator, radio operators and flight engineer were tops in their field.

There had been talk of an air route between Alaska and China, via either the Aleutians or Siberia, and it struck me that possibly Bill was headed for a Tokyo bombing, or maybe he was bringing a big shot Chinese to the country for some sort of huddle.

When important army officials wearing wings on their breasts poured into Cold Deck in practically every type of plane they use, except trainers, we all knew that something was in the wind. And if Axis spies had been planted amongst the sourdoughs, they knew it too. The general, colonels and majors directing things were tight-lipped and worried—plenty worried.

If you could get near enough to the airport administration building you could see them with their heads together over large maps and a few minutes later a plane would take off. Sometimes it would be a fast job. Again, a slow proposition that could loaf along without going into a stall.

When this searching business had gone on for a week without result, I corners the general—a youngish man named Addison. "Do you need any civilian help?" I ask.

"I'm afraid not, thanks," he answers politely.

"Can I make a speech?" I ask him.

"Go ahead. The right of free speech

is one of the things we are fighting for," he adds.

"It's this. First, I'm No-Shirt McGee, and me and my pardner, Bulldozer Craig have already been in action against the Japs," I tell him. "Secondly, a sourdough can see that you have the world's finest talent on this job. But the boys don't know Alaska. I've been here since 1898 and I don't know all there is to know about the country."

"Go ahead," he says when I wait to see how he's taking all this. Back in the depths of his eyes I can see plenty of worry working overtime.

"This is late April and the country's still frozen up. All of your calculations are based on that," I explained. "Suddenly the break-up comes and things change overnight. Frozen lakes and rivers your boys have been landing on, will thaw. The swamps your ground searchers are walking over will turn into mud. There'll be rivers of water flowing over ice. And it'll come in torrents, too." I stop for breath, then go on because I see the worry deepen in his eyes. "I'm telling you this because if you can use an old-timer like me you can cash in before it's too late."

"Go on," he urges.

"There isn't much more to say, except this," I tell him, "I figger me and Bulldozer proved our loyalty to the country when we fought Japs out on the Aleutians and rigged up a plane field by freezing dammed up water. Maybe you don't want to admit there's a big-shot Chinese or Russian official on that plane—"

"Where did you ever get an idea like that?" he asks.

"Putting two and two together," I answer. "Planes have been down before, but no such talent as this ever joined in the search."

"What is your personal interest, if any?" His eyes bore right through me.

"Bill March," I answer. "His mother is an old gal of mine and I think a lot of him. But let's skip the personal angle—a lot of personal angle skipping is being done nowdays — an important official is down. The chances are pretty good they're all dead. But they *could* be alive. If they're trapped in some canyon they'll never weather the break-up."

"What makes you think they're likely to be trapped in a canyon."

"Again, I'm drawing from personal experience," I tell him. "As you've noticed, there're plenty of mountains in Alaska. Okay, a pilot has engine trouble. He looks for a place to set her down. He never has much choice, nor any too much time to make it in. If there's a river handy, he lands on the ice, hoping he can fly out. If he can't, then he can walk out. If he cracks up, and everybody's hurt, then he waits until somebody comes."

ADDISON probably has his orders, to say nothing about the plane to civilians, but if his orders aren't elastic enough to let him use his own judgment in a pinch, somebody higher up has missed the boat. He smokes a couple of cigarettes, then spreads out a map on a table. "Very well, Mr. McGee," he says, "you know the country, so you might help us. We *have* been handicapped by the fact we can't take the public into our confidence. Chin Tuck Fong was aboard that plane — probably with very confidential papers."

I whistle soft and low. Chin Tuck Fong's name don't make the headlines, but he's worth more to China than several divisions of men, or a cruiser squadron. Now I'm beginning to feel the jitters, and the sweat on my face ain't from hard work.

"Tell me, General Addison, was Bill March aboard?"

"Yes. You guessed it," he answered. Then he gave me an outline of what had been done. The plane's route had been traced across Siberia to Nome. Nome had reported it, but a blizzard was blowing and they couldn't land. They'd gone on. Radio compass bearings indicated they'd headed for Cold Deck, but there was a lot

of static at the time and they couldn't be sure at Cold Deck and Beaver Landing whether they had crossed bearings on Bill's plane or some other.

Addison gives me plenty of time to read the dope they had on the flight and what they thought might have happened, then he asks, "You've flown with Bill March and others many times, Mr. McGee. You must know something of their line of reasoning. What do *you* think Bill March might have done? We'll assume he had engine trouble, or was short of fuel. We'll assume he never for a moment forgot the importance of his passenger. We'll assume the man in command of the plane was willing to sacrifice everyone aboard providing he could save his Chinese passenger's life."

"I don't think that's an assumption," I interrupt. "I think it's a fact."

I'D FLOWN plenty of times with Bill March between Cold Deck and Nome. It's a long hop and there're some plenty high mountains to get over. Sometimes when the plane was overloaded, or a motor wasn't giving its all we'd go through Snow Pass and follow Raging River down to Cold Deck. Then I'd look into Hell Roaring Canyon and Dead Man's Island and wonder whether there was gold under the seething, frothing water that boiled around the island.

The island couldn't have been more than a couple of hundred yards wide and a quarter mile long. Why the high water and ice hadn't worn it away long ago was something no man could answer for sure. Probably a granite formation was responsible.

Several times men crossing the river above the canyon had been caught and carried into it. None had ever come out. It was full of tricky updrafts and downdrafts and once I had said, "Bill, you sure fly high over this spot." And he had answered, "I learned about Hell Roaring air the hard way. I was nearly on the island before the downdraft laid off. Even then it took all my motors had to pull me out. The walls are three thousand feet high and I had to follow the blasted canyon as I climbed."

From seven thousand feet, the country looked beautiful, with the rough stuff flattened out. Now, as I tried to figger out what Bill might have done I felt sure he had taken the Snow Pass cut-off to Cold Deck and somewhere along the way something had happened. I wanted to be sure it wasn't a hunch I was playing, though. This was no time for hunches.

When General Addison came in again I asked, "Have you searched this country from a low altitude?"

"March advised all planes to keep clear of it," Addison answers. "But in the search we've covered it. But not from a low altitude."

"I'd like to fly over it," I said. "I think I'll know where to look."

"Why would March advise the route?" Addison asks. "Particularly with Chin Tuck Fong aboard."

"The plane might have been in trouble," I answer, "and the Raging River route was their best bet."

"We'll give you our best pilot when the weather clears," he tells me.

The weather clears two days later and I find myself in a neat little job that can sure climb. It seems to me the propellers pull us straight up, then we level off and the world rolls under us like a belt on a drive wheel.

"You're the boss, Mr. McGee," the pilot says. "Where away?"

I trace a ragged circle on a map and he gets on the course. We clear a high mountain range by a lean margin, quarter several hundred miles of back country, then approach Snow Pass. "I figgered the lost plane might have hit while searching for the pass," I tell the pilot, "but I guess it got through."

Hunting for a lost plane is a grim business at any time, but it's much worse in a

mountain country. You look for trees with broken tops—knocked off when the plane crashed. Or you study the sheer cliffs that are always free of snow. Several tons of plane striking at better than two hundred miles an hour will knock off the weathered rock and leave the stuff underneath exposed. You can spot it any time. Or if there's been a fire, then a heavy snowstorm, the wreckage may be covered, but the sheer cliffs will be smoked up.

There was none of this in the back country, and now we're bouncing through Snow Pass. Bill March used to say he could always tell when he was over the pass by the feeling in the seat of his pants. It was a sort of constant spanking as the currents tossed the plane up and down.

AS WE'RE in snow clouds with no visibility for the first time since we left Cold Deck, I open a couple of letters that had been handed me just as we were leaving. One was Hopeful Harry Hawkins wanting to know if I'd grubstake him on a tin prospecting trip. Harry hadn't made a strike since he'd come to the country in '98 and he probably never would, but the country needs tin and backing Harry was one way of helping out. And there was placer tin in the country he wanted to prospect.

The other letter is addressed to Mr. Michael J. McGee. There are only a few people who know my real name and one of 'em is an old gal of mine named Anna March. After all these years, her handwriting still gives me a thrill. The letter reads:

Dear Michael:

Have you seen anything of that boy of mine? Of course, I have been getting letters regularly from him, but—well, a person who spends her life in a wheel chair becomes too smart, at times, for her own peace of mind.

For example, Bill is a natural-born ink thief. He never remembers to keep his pen filled, so he sucks up a barrel full from the nearest ink bottle. As a result, in the middle of a letter, the ink slowly changes from black, say to a mixed shade of black and purple, then purple. Or it will be a sudden change from violet to Nile green. He also has a trick of hurrying when the letter is a long one, and the words are cramped and the letters *o* and *q* are angular.

My last letters have been written in ink of the same color and all, except the first show hurried writing. I know they were written at one sitting and postdated. Now, if Bill is on some government mission I have no complaint, naturally. But if he's had to go through some serious operation, I want to be informed. The darling young fraud didn't deceive his old mother. And as for you, Michael, you've always been a poor hand at deception where the girls are concerned, though, the Lord knows, you've tried enough. You know I can take it, so let's have the truth straight from the shoulder.

There's another reason. Mother's Day is in the offing, and if Bill's call isn't coming through for the first time, I want to brace myself *in advance of the day.*

Well, from there the letter went into gossip of the people she'd seen—the kind of thing people confined to chairs write. Then I think of the Mother's Day letter Bill had given me to send in case he didn't show up. That seemed to answer all questions until I remember Anna will take one look at the writing and know it was written along with the rest. Even the letter *a* on the address is almost triangular. Bill's a smart one, but he overlooked his mother's knowledge of his handwriting. He should have written those letters one a day instead of a long, single session. "Life's just one damned thing after another," I mutter dejectedly. Which same ain't no original saying.

I turn to the pilot. "The bumping

around's stopped, so we're through. If you want to drop down a couple of thousand feet—not more'n that—you may get a look at the country. Air currents seem to push up the clouds around the headwaters of Raging River."

A FEW seconds later we're looking at a dreary country and rain is splattering all over our green house. "The break-up's here," I tell him. Then as we pass close to a cliff I can see water tumbling over a falls that had been a sheet of ice all winter long.

"Look," the pilot says, "the ice has gone out of the river. That's moving water down there."

"It's water flowing over ice several feet thick," I answer. "About twenty miles from here you'll sight Hell Roaring Canyon. In the middle will be Dead Man's Island. I'm telling you now so you can slow down. Otherwise it'll be a blur."

He grins and the motors ease up a little. I see the canyon walls come up on either side and let out a yelp. "See," he answers, "we can always climb out with this baby." He guns her and the walls drop under the wings, then down we go again.

Suddenly I yell, "There's the island and somebody's on it."

"Did you see 'em?"

"No. There wasn't time. But I'm sure some of the brush is gone—burned for fuel," I answer. "Driftwood piles up on the upstream end and I think I spotted a snow-drifted trail to the driftwood."

"You're a honey," he answers. "All I saw was brush and the island." He climbs out downstream and turns around. "We'll have another look, Mr. McGee, and take a picture or two."

"But don't go down too low."

And so we go down too low.

There isn't a sign of life, but the trail is plain enough to an old sourdough who is used to the snow. The pilot still can't see it. We're going still lower," he says.

"Better report the situation to Cold Deck," I advise, "so they'll know where to look for the pieces."

Back we come and I can see water tearing holes in the snow as it boils downstream over the ice. Suddenly we're a hundred feet above the island, with the plane flying just short of stalling speed. Even then it's too fast for a careful look. "They hit there," the pilot says. "I saw a wing against the canyon wall. It was torn off and thrown against it. Snow drifted over it, but the water washed some of it away. We'll go back for another look."

I have my doubts about that. So has the pilot. Our wheels are down almost to the snow and he's sweating blood as he follows the canyon back and forth. First one wing tip nearly hits, then as he gets it clear the air currents toss us toward the opposite side. All the time those engines are wide open, trying to lift us out.

Well, we make it.

"You weren't kidding when you said flying in the canyon isn't safe," he said. "But we'll go back for another look."

We didn't go as low this time. I saw something that might be part of a wing protruding from the snow, and as I look back I catch a glimpse of smoke. "Somebody's alive!" I yell.

Now we come back. The smoke is almost gone, but the pilot says, "That's from a burning mixture of gasoline and crankcase oil. At least one man's alive, but he's in bad shape or he'd crawl into the open. How in the hell are we going to reach them? You can't land a plane. If there wasn't so much water in the canyon we might go over the ice. What about going down by boat after the break-up?"

"Those piles of snow you see are boulders, drifted over," I explain. "Even at low water the falls and whirlpools will smash any boat."

"Suppose someone did get down there and grabbed that Chinese diplomat's papers?" he suggests.

"The chances are," I answer, "an ice

jam will form upstream in a week or so. Then it'll go out and for a few hours Dead Man's Island will be under ten feet of water filled with grinding ice. That'll take care of confidential papers."

WE'RE both gloomy when we land at Cold Deck. We make our report and the gloom is so thick in the room that you could cut it with a knife. The general breaks the silence. "Good God," McGee, isn't there *something you* can do. Or that *we* can do. Where in hell is our American resourcefulness we boast of? I'm not criticizing you gentlemen. My brain isn't sparking, either." He paces the room several seconds, then adds, "You say a boat would be smashed?"

"Yes."

"What about a steel boat, with plenty of air chambers?"

"It might get through, but it would have to be dropped into the canyon by parachute—if you're to beat the break-up. Even then I doubt if the steel would be thick enough to resist some of the rocks it would strike. That's the trouble—steel and wood are almost rigid. Now you take an Eskimo skin boat—an umiak—and it gives when striking the ice and——"

"What's the matter?" the general asks when I suddenly stop talking. "Sick? Give McGee a drink of whiskey."

No McGee ever failed to respond to a little snort, but this time I didn't need one. "What's the matter with dropping the *U. S. S. Eskimo* into the canyon? That's the umiak I used in the Aleutian Island operations against the Japs. You could drop me and Bulldozer Craig, my pardner, along with outboard motors and supplies, and if there's enough water flowing over the ice we might make it to Dead Man's Island, pick up the injured and possibly get out ahead of the big break-up."

"That," the general declares, "is the biggest gamble I've ever heard of anyone taking. You certainly are burning your bridges. Well, in war, it is the unusual that often wins. You and your ice rink airport certainly fooled the Japs. You know, of course, the chances are all against your getting out of this alive?"

"Sure," I admit. "But I've lived quite awhile, drunk more than my share of whiskey and life don't owe me a damned thing, so what the hell?"

"What about Bulldozer Craig?"

"The whole thing listens good to me," Bulldozer says. "When a man's got a heart murmur that keeps him out of the army he has to do the next best thing. When do we start?"

"At daybreak tomorrow," I answer, "providing the army can fly the *U. S. S. Eskimo* to Cold Deck?" I keep from grinning. If there's anything that'll make the army do the impossible, it's to hint they can't do it.

I GET some sleep and when I wake up there's a hot breakfast all spread out and a stack of mail beside my plate. Also there is a stenographer waiting with pencil poised. It's plain they don't expect me to come back, and are helping me wind up my affairs.

I read the top letter.

Dear Michael:

Please disregard my last letter about Bill. I'm afraid I wasn't keeping my chin up, what with millions of other mothers going through the same period of uncertainty. I'll make it through Mother's Day just fine and dandy.

I suppose it all goes back to a day last month when I was *low*. It's been a long time since Bill and I have had a real visit together. When he'd drop in, he was always in a hurry. In the excitement we'd forget the things we really wanted to talk about. And so, if I hear from him Mother's Day, or I don't, it's quite all right. I've a good hold on myself, and won't go sissy on you again.

Sincerely,

ANNA.

Well, the first thing I do is to tear up Bill's Mother's Day letter, then I write her a nice, long friendly one. I answer the others, pay my bills, shake hands with my friends, then pile into a jeep and go out to the airport.

The *U. S. S. Eskimo* is lashed under a bomber. It's been padded, then crated. Also padded and crated are the outboard motors and cans of gasoline. The best grub in camp is made up into several packages so that if one is lost, another has a chance of being found. There are also first-aid packs with parachutes attached.

"How do you feel, Bulldozer?" I ask.

"About the way a man does when he's about to get married—kinda funny in the stomach. A sort of scared feelin'," he answers.

This bomber is a big brute, but the air currents at the headwaters of Raging River toss it around like a feather. The pilot, who looks as if he should still be in high school, is a cool one. He takes plenty of time getting the feel of things before he's ready to drop down low. He drops one of the outboard motors, then circles and checks on the drift as the wind catches the parachute. The parachute bounces against the canyon wall, but it looks as if the motor had landed in a snow drift. The parachute is red, and easy to spot.

Some of the lighter supplies follow the motors and fuel down, then he's ready for the *U. S. S. Eskimo*. The navigator and bomber have had their heads together for some time figgerin' out the speed that the umiak will drop, and how far the wind will carry it. Then the plane gets on a course and the umiak is cut loose.

We circle and watch. For a minute it looks to me as if the umiak was going to pile up in the cliffs, but it clears and lands within a quarter of a mile of the motors. Everything is now down there but No-Shirt McGee and Bulldozer Craig.

The bomb bay doors slowly open and one of the young officers looks at me. "Say ***when!***" I tell him.

"When!" he answers, and I fall through. It sure is a funny feeling to find yourself in mid-air and a plane leaving you flat. I yank the rip cord as per instructions and a couple of years later the chute opens up. I'm a long ways from being over the canyon—one hell of a long ways. Under my dangling legs are pinnacle peaks, lateral canyons, snowfields and hanging glaciers. But they seem to be moving, and just when it seems as if I'm going to smash against an outcropping, the canyon walls slide smoothly upward, and before I know it I'm hip deep in the snow. High above I can see Bulldozer.

A rain cloud has blown over the canyon and he and the first drops arrive together. He goes armpit deep in a drift, cuts loose the parachute and wallows out. "We can't back out now, No-Shirt," he says brightly. "Let's take a look at the *U. S. S. Eskimo*—that's the important thing."

We knock off the crate and check up. The umiak is in perfect shape. Getting the outboard motors out of their drifts is a tough job. They'd gone deep and they are plenty heavy. We had a list of everything, and as fast as we'd find an item we'd check it off. Except for fifty pounds of grub, we hadn't lost a thing.

Everything is piled into the umiak and with Bulldozer in front pulling and me behind pushing, we skid it over the ice, following the small, two-inch deep stream that's washing out the snow.

Later, that stream is wide and deep enough so that we can get aboard, and with the aid of sharp-pointed poles make fair time, but the water isn't deep enough to use the motors. "How far's Dead Man's Island?" Bulldozer asks. It's late afternoon, rain is coming down in sheets and it's getting dark in the canyon.

"Five miles," I answer.

"What's that thunder?" he asks.

"There's a warm creek that throws out water days ahead of the main break-up," I tell him. "It drops several hundred feet. It may give us trouble."

It does!

It's hammered out a basin, which forms a whirlpool and we fight like hell to keep from being thrown under the falls. "I think this deal is in the bag, No-Shirt," he says when we're in the clear. "There's enough water running over the ice to take us along at a fast clip, but not enough to form whirlpools and rapids downstream."

"This whole business can go out fast once it starts," I answer.

Overhead we can hear a plane's motors droning as the pilot tries to see what's going on without getting too low. "All that bird is seeing is clouds," Bulldozer drawls. He drives the pike pole into the ice and swings the bow clear of a small ice jam, and we shoot down something mighty close to a rapids. The *U. S. S. Eskimo* smacks against an ice-coated boulder and slips away. "If this had been a wooden boat it'd've gone to pieces right there," Bulldozer says.

I nod. Dead Man's Island is ahead—splitting the stream—and the water is moving plenty fast. "If we miss it," I yell, "there's one chance in a hundred we can get into the eddy at the lower end and work our way ashore."

I head for the point and Bulldozer stands up, ready to go overboard the instant we strike. A hundred yards from solid rock, an ice-coated boulder knocks the bow around and we wallow, sideways, downstream. The long, narrow island commences to slip past.

Bulldozer goes over the side before I can stop him. He grabs the umiak and tries to dig in his feet. "You can't hold her," I yell, "your feet will skid over the bottom."

"They're already skiddin'," he answers.

He's waist deep in the icy water and the chill goes to his marrow, but there's nothing wrong with the big fellow's brains. Put him in a tough spot, and he'll spark ninety-nine times out of a hundred. He grabs the bow line—light, but strong stuff made of seal skin—and fights his way to the bank, paying out the line as he goes. He runs along the bank a few yards until he can find a place to dig in his heels, then he sets himself. For a few seconds it looks as if the umiak would yank him into the water, then it swings over to the bank, and I jump ashore.

HIS face is covered with moisture, and this time it isn't rain. It's cold sweat from his effort. "That thing must weigh a ton," he gasps.

"What do you think?" I answer. "Four heavy outboard motors; fuel, grub—and——"

"And No-Shirt McGee," he adds. "Well, we made it, but say, isn't that stream risin' fast."

As we watch, the *U. S. S. Eskimo* is lifted from the spot where we'd stranded it. Somewhere upstream a small ice jam has let go and the water backed up behind it is coming down. "Keep an eye on the umiak," I tell him, "while I find out who is alive. With luck we may be able to get out of here in five or ten minutes."

"And go downstream after dark?" he gasps.

"After dark is better than going down with the ice," I remind him.

I make for the spot where I'd seen smoke. The plane's smashed cabin is jammed between two boulders that protrude above the ice on the other side of the island. There's one wing leaning against the wall across the river, but the other has spanned a couple of drifts. I look underneath and find empty grub tins, blackened stones, ashes, the charred ends of sticks and a stew kettle. A coffee pot is on its side. There are five sleeping bags in a row and a couple of empty ones, bundled and lashed. Scattered around are first-aid articles and a couple of splints someone tried to use, then threw aside.

I reach my hand inside the first bag and feel a neck. It's warm and has a pulse. "Chin Tuck Fong?" I ask.

"Who is it?" the Chinese asks.

"Rescue party," I answer.

"We are in a bad—way," the Chinese answers. "Look after the—others. I—can wait."

"I'll be back," I tell him, then I bellow at Bulldozer. "Secure the umiak and come a-running. Bring grub and first aid with you."

Well, when men are hurt you can't play favorites, no matter how you feel inside. You can't play favorites when you know your old girl's boy is amongst the injured. I took pulses first, and some of them were pretty doggoned faint.

The weakest pulse got first attention. He was a captain and had chest injuries and was suffering from exposure. The next one was Bill—broken leg and exposure, with possible internal injuries.

While I'm doing my best, Bulldozer gets a roaring fire going, warms water, and heats the soup and stuff the doctors said should be given the injured men. Well, you can't pour liquids down the throats of unconscious men, but those we bring around take it. One poor devil has a broken jaw and he's a problem.

There's a lot of horsepower locked up in Bulldozer's husky body, and he turns it on. He brings up wood and keeps the fire going and helps me put splints on one man, and lash another to a board. I'm worried about his back, and there's liable to be a lot of bouncing around on the trip downstream.

Chin Tuck Fong responds first. "I have terrible headaches," he explains, "but I can tell you what happened."

It's about the story you'd expect. A crew of young Americans had the job of delivering a Chinese diplomat safe and sound, and they didn't intend to fall down on the job. The weather decided otherwise. Fuel was low and it was a case of set the plane down. They gave Bill March the job of finding the spot. He knew the visibility and ceiling at Cold Deck were zero, but he thought there might be a clear area in the vicinity of Hell Roaring Canyon because air currents had a tendency to push up the clouds.

They had circled a half hour before Bill was confident, from his experience in flying in that region, that they were above the canyon. Obviously, Bill had reasoned, the most important life from the war standpoint was Chin Tuck Fong's.

He had said, "There's a chance I can set her down on the ice above Dead Man's Island. If we crack up and you can walk, take a sleeping bag, food, axe and the light sled you'll find in the baggage compartment, and head downstream. You can't get lost—just keep going until you reach Cold Deck. The army will look after you."

Then, over Fong's protests, they had put him in the safest part of the plane and packed sleeping bags and other protection about him. According to him, the wind had increased the plane's landing speed, and the ice prevented much use of the brakes. Bill had tried to squeeze in between the island and canyon wall. The wing tip had struck, and was torn off. From that moment Fong's memory was vague. He had awakened to the groans of men.

One, evidently internally injured but not realizing it, helped him from the wreckage. He got the others into their sleeping bags in a shelter under the wing, located fuel, started a fire and was in the midst of preparing a meal from emergency rations when he had suddenly died. The second man had been dead when taken from the wreckage.

While Fong is finishing his story, the roar of the flood increases. Bulldozer brings the *U. S. S. Eskimo* over the snow to a point near the injured men. In case the island is flooded, we're in a position to hastily load everyone aboard and take our chances.

Around one o'clock I hear Bill March whisper, "Fong!"

Fong answers, then Bill says, "I had the damndest dream. Dreamed No-Shirt McGee was talking—telling everyone that we

are going to get out of this okay. Bulldozer Craig's voice was just as plain as yours, too. Then I got to thinking of Mom and how tough this is going to be on her. Trouble is, I can't seem to think straight. I start and end up in a blind alley. Fong, is that the break-up I hear or just a roaring in my ears?"

"It's the break-up, Bill," I tell him. "You're coming out of it, kid, you really are. I may be a nightmare at times, but I'm no part of a dream."

"Uncle No-Shirt!" Bill exclaims.

"Take it easy, Bill," I warn. "Now that you won't choke to death, let me pour something into you that should hit the spot."

He takes what I give him, then whispers. "Boy! That sure did hit the spot. Listen, did you mail that Mother's Day letter?"

Well here it was, put to me straight from the shoulder. There was only one answer. "No, Bill, I didn't. I don't figger your number is up yet. You'll talk to her as usual next Sunday."

He looks at me as if he figgered I'd let him down, then sighs, "Hell, it's going to be tough on her. And she's had it tough enough in this man's world."

Around three o'clock all of the injured've taken a little nourishment and are sleeping. I gave 'em each a pill, as per doctor's orders when we started on this jaunt.

"We'd better get a little shut-eye," Bulldozer suggests. "It ain't a case of which we want to do, it's what's best to do, and we've got to be in top shape tomorrow."

IT'S broad daylight when Bulldozer shakes me. I jump up and blink my eyes. Water's frothing over the upper end of the island, but it's piled up enough ice to keep it from reaching us. There's a growl and grind of ice until you can hardly hear yourself think.

Bulldozer's fixed two of the outboards to the *U. S. S. Eskimo* but they're turned around so we can check the run of the umiak if it shows signs of piling into something bad. And sometimes those signs give you short notice in a break-up. Iron bars protect the propellers. This slows down the speed, but it also keeps the ice from knocking off the blades.

The Chinese diplomat is limping around. He's weak and has to grab things to steady himself, but in a few days he'll be okay—if he lives through what's ahead.

The others, particularly Bill, are in great pain, but they're stronger, too. Before we can get ready to shove off, the river suddenly rises and I can hear a new roar—a sort of booming sound—echoing through the canyon. A wall of water and ice about four feet high comes around the bend, piles up against the wall, surges back to the other wall and comes on—like a drunken man trying to follow a path.

Even a umiak can't live in that ice. It hits the upper end of the island, and Bill, who knows something about breakups, says, "This is it, No-Shirt. You were a fool to think you could save us—a swell fool!"

The diplomat appreciates the danger for the first time, but his face is grave. He isn't scared. It looks to me as if we're all going to be swept off, but the ice jams on the mass already stranded on the tip of the island and this splits the current. The water climbs slowly up the sides, instead of coming over the top. All we can do is watch.

"Right now," Bulldozer says, "we could use that old king who commanded the waves to stop."

"But the command wasn't obeyed," the diplomat reminds him. "Mr. McGee what prompted you to practically throw your life away for us?"

"Well," I answer, "it started because the son of an old girl of mine was in a jam, then the war angle developed—trained army pilots and a Chinese diplomat with important papers—and, well—a man goes ahead at such times. An old buzzard

like me can't get into the army. But if the young fellows with life ahead of them can take a chance, it won't hurt me none."

A couple of hours later an army plane breaks through, roars down the canyon and vanishes into the mists above the walls. We wave to let him know we've made the grade so far.

He comes back again a few minutes later and drops a note. "Ice dam forming ten miles upstream. Hell of a lot of water piling up behind it."

"Then where's this water comin' from?" Bulldozer asks. "Side creeks emptyin' into Ragin' River? Or stuff comin' through the ice dam?"

"Both," I answer. "And it means we've got to clear out of here pronto."

There's slack water at the lower end of the island. We clear it of ice and launch the umiak. Then carry our injured men in improvised stretchers and stow them on the bottom. Every one of them is conscious, and the fact they figger there's one chance in a thousand of escaping buoys them up. A day ago, they figgered there was a chance in a million.

While we're getting ready to shove off the plane comes back again and down comes a note. "Ice jam fifteen miles downstream. Lake forming behind it. Do you think pontoon plane could land and take off injured men?"

"Bulldozer," I yell, "make a big NO in driftwood and underscore it." I don't need to tell him, nor Bill March, that that dam is liable to let go and that we'd have a seaplane crew on our hands. If the pontoon job wasn't smashed up getting into the canyon, it would crash trying to climb out.

BULLDOZER tosses driftwood around for a couple of minutes, then we're ready. The last thing is to cover the *U. S. S. Eskimo* from bow to stern with a tarp. We leave holes for me and Bulldozer to stick our heads and shoulders out, so we can work the umiak, but that's all. "You fellows can't see what's going on," I explain, "but it's the only way to keep water out."

"And it's another way to keep 'em from bein' scared stiff," Bulldozer whispers. "They can't see what's comin'. That lake has me worried, too."

Pressure is liable to push a hole through the bottom of the jam, leaving an arch at water level. You can only be sucked through a mess like that once.

With all motors turning over slowly, we shove off. By speeding up the bow motors slightly, we overcome the drag of the stern motors, and get a little headway. We can feel ice thumping away at the hull constantly, with now and then a big slab shoving the umiak off its course. Chin Tuck Fong is sprawled almost at my feet, his hand clutching the briefcase with the confidential papers. I had told him if he tossed it overboard the ice would grind it to sheds, but he's tied a rock to it, so it'll sink.

The plane comes over again. The Army's watching every move we make. Bulldozer takes his pike pole and shoves a mass of ice clear and the umiak squeezes

through. I can feel the ice bumping against the skin under my feet, and one of the wounded men groans. We've padded them as well as we can, but even then they'll feel a hard bump against the hull.

We go along a mile, with the ice grinding away on both sides of us, and piling up against boulders, then suddenly giving way, Bulldozer stands up to shove a slab clear and nearly loses his balance. "Set

In our next Issue

Short Stories, June 10th

Five men and six keys guarded the Sky Dragon Treasure . . . . *But it was not enough!*

THE ONE-EYED MASK

A long Chinatown novelette by

Walter C. Brown

A Halfaday Creek story

"The Man Who Loved Dogs"

JAMES B. HENDRYX

A dead man walks on a stormy night!

"Dr. Strange Job"

WILLIAM G. BOGART

WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

Recruits, snipers and tanks in Hawaii . . .

"Willie Doesn't Hold the Bag"

GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

JAMES NORMAN

And others

H. BEDFORD-JONES

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

down," I yell, "only George Washington stood up in a boat and got away with it. That was when he crossed the Delaware. And I've always felt he pulled a boner. You're no Washington."

We sheer away from the mass, with the help of his pike pole and another man groans. They're taking a beating down there.

The miles slip past, with water pouring in from side streams and the ice getting thicker. We round a bend and the lake I expect to find is gone. Ahead, there's a mass spanning the river. The water sags downward as though pushed by an invisible hand, and ice seems to be flowing in from each side. I open the stern motors wide and for several tense minutes we hold the umiak against the current.

"If we go into that we're goners," Bulldozer warns.

Well, a mass piles up against our stern and we have no choice. I shut off, and he opens his motors to get away from the mass behind us. We drop suddenly and I can see the sides of the umiak bend in and out as the ice slabs hammer it. The injured groan until I ache all over, and with their groans comes the creak of the umiak ribs giving a little under the strain. We drop suddenly with a violent shock and the injured man lashed to the board bounces up and hits the tarp. I can see

the outline of his chin and folded arms against the canvas.

"He's unconscious," Bill gasps. "I don't think he felt it. I'm hanging on to the board so he won't skid into the others."

"How're you?"

"Plenty of strength in my arms," he answers between set teeth. "I can hang onto him awhile longer. How much more of this is ahead?"

"We're getting through."

"You never were a good liar, No-Shirt," he comments.

The canyon narrows and we stop in slack water behind a jam that has formed between two boulders. Bulldozer is a moose of a man, but his arms ache from fighting the ice with the pike pool. He needs a rest, but just as I think he's going to get it, the dam goes out.

WE GRIND our way around another bend and he points. Solid water is dropping five hundred feet and hitting an ice mass mixed with boulders. Here it froze to the river bottom last winter and the ice hasn't moved yet. The water hits, bounces and you can't see a thing for the spray.

Then we're in it. It almost knocks me over, and I feel the wind leave my lungs as if a dozen fists had hit me on the ribs and chest at the same instant. Water drives through holes in the tarp and commences to soak into the sleeping bags. I can feel the damp chill work through my socks and into my feet.

Bulldozer is sprawled against the side, and his pike pole is floating fifteen feet from the umiak. There's a gash on his head. The silence inside the umiak worries me. I don't know whether they've died from heart strain or shock. The canyon walls fall away and we're through. The pressure eases up a little and there are even stretches of open water. I turn my stern motors around so they'll drive the umiak ahead and open the throttles halfway. The first hour seems a week, with Bulldozer dead to the world and me not daring to leave my seat to help him.

Once I yell, "Bill! How're you doing down there?" There's no answer. I mentally check what's ahead. Another canyon —wide and free of boulders, then a big

falls a few miles above Cold Deck. I've got to fight through the ice to the bank before the umiak reaches the falls.

The plane comes through the rain again, flying low because there's plenty of room. It goes back and forth several times, but I can't look up, much. I yell. "Bulldozer! Bulldozer! Snap out of it! Shake the fog out of your brain and give me a hand!"

There's no answer, so I bellow, "Fong! Fong!"

The Chinese diplomat is out, too.

As we break out of the second canyon I can see people scattered along the bank, waiting to see what happens, but all of them ready to give me a hand if possible. Now I try to drive the umiak toward the bank, but the ice has packed along the water's edge and it keeps throwing me back, because most of it has stranded. It's too rough for anyone to climb over, though several, with ropes, try it.

I CAN see a column of mist ahead. It marks the falls a mile away. Well, it's time to get scared. I watch the bank for a spot to crash the umiak, but give it up, because the injured are in no shape to stand a crash. I turn the motors around, and by opening one wide, and drifting with the ice, the umiak turns around with the bow upstream. Now, with both motors pulling it stern first, I head for the bank.

People are running in every direction, and some of them are trying to get over the ice. I take a sealskin line and make it secure to the umiak's stern, then I tie the other end around my waist. I rip away the tarp, and stand up. The stern hits the ice and I open the motors wide to keep it there, then I jump.

The first mass starts to give way, but I leave it and hit the next. I go down to my knees before I stumble to another block. There's ten feet of ice between me in the umiak, but that ain't enough. I jump for another section and make it.

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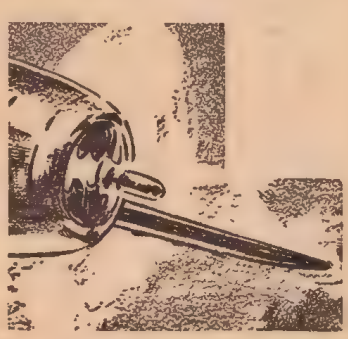
Fifteen feet now. Then twenty. There's not much slack left in the line, so I make the final jump.

As my feet drive through slush ice, I think, "This is the end of No-Shirt McGee." I go down to my hips, and I think, "My body should make a damned good anchor until the whole works starts moving." Then I'm shoulder deep, with both hands clutching at a slab. I last perhaps a minute, then water working through the stranded ice pulls me under.

It sounds for a minute as if a hundred



men are beating tin pans in my ears. "So this is drowning," I think. My past life don't come to me. And it's just as well.

After the tin pans quiet down I hear something else—a church bell. "No-Shirt McGee's funeral," I think. Then somebody says, "A good snort of whiskey might help. Or if he could see a squaw at a sourdough dance it might help—"

They don't serve whiskey or talk of squaws at funerals—even sourdough funerals. I open an eye. There's an army nurse looking down at me, and an army doctor beside me. Bulldozer is standing against the wall, his head bandage.

Bulldozer grins. "Well, you old horse thief," he says, "I figgered the mention of hooch or a klootch—that's Chinook for woman—would bring you around."

"What happened?" I ask.

"You just tried to swallow most of the Ragin' River," he said. "The army boys threw planks over the ice to the umiak. By the way, the navy wants you. You make a swell anchor."

"How about the others, specially Bill and Fong?"

"Fong's head was against the umiak's skin when it hit a block of ice. It left him cold. Bill is doin' okay."

"This is Sunday—Mothers' Day," I remind them. "If Bill can talk, get a call through to Anna March. He's got that coming to him. And so has she, eh, General?"

General Addison has come into the room.

"And order 'em to carry my bed alongside of Bill's," I suggest to the general.

A few minutes later I'm next to Bill. He's in bad shape, and I can see he's liable to cash in. "Listen, Bill," I say in a hoarse whisper, "this is your uncle, No-Shirt. They're putting a call through to your Mom. Pull yourself together."

His eyes flutter, and stare at the ceiling "Hold the transmitter to his lips," I whisper. There's a delay, but the call goe through, because Anna March has been roosting near the telephone all morning.

"Listen, Bill," I whisper, "your mom's waiting for that call. Are you going to let her down?"

His eyes blink, then I hear Anna's voice. "Hello, Bill. Are you there? I can't hear you."

Now you can almost see the fog roll back in his eyes, and the light that spells life and intelligence begin to glow. "Hello, Mom," he says, and it takes plenty of effort. "I'm—okay. Got into a jam. No-Shirt got me out. I've got a busted—leg. As soon as I can travel, I'll be—there We'll catch up on our visiting, the two of us—in our wheel chairs."

I lean over and add, "This is Michael, Anna. Bill's okay now. Honest! Have I ever tried to fool you?"

I can hear her happy sigh as she switches off, then I start to relax, but Fong is coming into the room. He's leaving in a few minutes, Mr. McGee," the general says. "I know you need the rest, but before he goes——" I listen to the rest, and get red in the face. When they start pinning medals on us McGees, we blush to beat hell.

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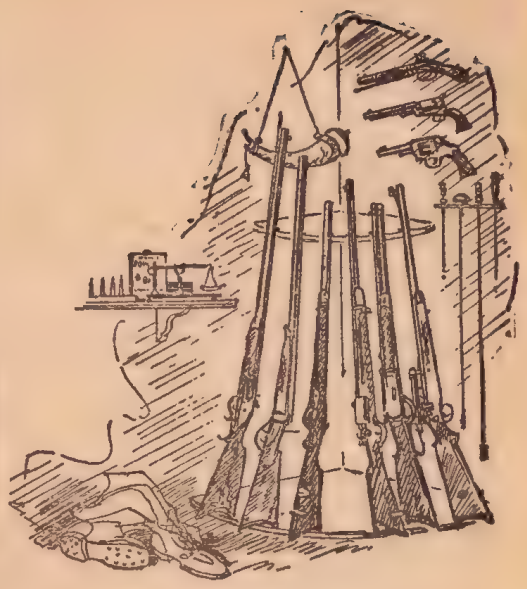

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

Black Jim, Outlaw

IF YOU were to ask me to name the kind of hunting I enjoy most, the answer would be Vermin and Pest shooting.

Take the crow, for instance. There is no smarter marauder rampant in this once peaceful world than this leather lunged black-feathered fiend. In fact, in the bird world he compares with certain two-legged varmints who are trying to make the world unsafe for decent people to live in.

Yet I have heard a more or less good word put in for Black Jim—which is more than I can say for the Axis. A cousin of mine who is a farmer in the Midwest once told me that he figured the crow paid his way by eating grasshoppers—yet he didn't

hesitate to permit a group of city shooters to come out to the farm and shoot crows until they were piled as high as a small barn.

Sharp telescopic eyesight is Mr. Crow's number one personal safety equipment. So the first requirement in crow shooting is perfect concealment. If you show yourself or move any portion of the blind in which you are hiding, Mr. Crow will almost without exception hightail it for parts unknown.

Many crow shooters use a shotgun, which will undoubtedly get more crows, but I prefer to use a super accurate high velocity flat trajectory rifle in small caliber.

A few rifles which meet these requirements are the .22 Hornet, .22 Kilborn

Hornet, .218 Bee, .218 Mashburn Bee, .22-3000 Lovell, .22 2R Lovell, .257 Roberts and so on.

Where to get ammunition? Well, if you haven't a few rounds tucked away for a rainy day you're not completely out of luck for our Government has made provisions for farmers, stockmen, ranchers, etc., to procure the following ammunition to be used for Pest and Vermin control:

100—.22 Long Rifle Cartridges.
40—.30-30 Rifle Cartridges.
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To get back to Mr. Crow—let's see just what deviltry he gets into which puts him

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well toward the top of the vermin list.

It has been estimated that crows reduce the annual increase in duck population by one-third. The toll taken by crows in upland bird life is terrific. Entire clutches of pheasant eggs have been cleaned out by a single Black Jim. Nesting quail are continually persecuted to appease the appetite of these hungry devils.

And so the next time you see wild fowl in flight, say to yourself, "That flock would be one-third larger if the crows hadn't fattened their worthless bodies on unhatched eggs. It's a fact that if the duck nests were left unmolested by crows for only a single breeding season the increase would be noticeable to even the most casual observer when the birds traveled over their flyways the following fall.

With the present shortage of ammunition there will no doubt be less crow shooting this year than heretofore. If you have only .22 Long Rifle ammo don't expend it on a target. You can get better and more practical practice bringing down Jim Crow and be helping our country at the same time. For it's a well-known fact that a flock of crows can also raise havoc with a grain field.

As I said before, methods of crow hunting are various. Some merely hide in the woods, near open fields, henyards, piggeries, granaries, and wait until they hear crows coming. Then, at the opportune moment they stand up and let 'em have it.

Most crow hunters hide near places where crows are known to be and by diligent use of the caller bring them within range. Don't use short calls. These are danger signals. Usually three good blasts

in a series, given rather slowly, will arouse the curiosity of any Black Jim in the vicinity and bring him within range. However, crow calling is an art and it takes much experience and a lot of practice to really get good.

The decoy staked out in front of a blind, with the help of a good crow call will also bring 'em in.

Of course the live owl is the best decoy of all. Crows love nothing more than to persecute a sun-dazzled owl and will flock to a live or stuffed owl with glee. A captive crow or dead crow tied in pairs and hung over bare limbs of nearby trees will arouse the curiosity of their erstwhile flockmates.

My favorite method of crow hunting is to take one of my high velocity scope mounted rifles and make the rounds of a number of fields where I have often found crows feeding. The shots are taken at any distance, sometimes as far as 300 yards or more. It takes about half a day to make the hunt and one or two birds are generally killed at each stand. We are doing farm work two or three days a week which has taken up most of my hunting time. But at that, a couple evenings shooting a week is plenty for vermin control.

Crow shooting is best in the late spring or early summer when he begins taking his tremendous toll of game and song birds' eggs. It's more difficult to decoy him in the winter and early spring. While the number of hunters in the field during the fall make it very hard to get him within range.

If you are a shotgun man, crow shooting is a good way to brush up on your wing-shooting and at the same time do your share in keeping Black Jim under control—and have a swell time doing it!

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